

“A FAIRER HOUSE THAN PROSE”: VERSE AND ITS OTHERS IN AMERICAN
POETRY, 1850–1950

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A Fairer House than Prose: Verse and Its Others in American Poetry, 1850–1950 traces the shifting meanings of the seemingly self-evident terms *verse* and *prose*, and argues that nineteenth- and twentieth-century American poetry marks a peculiarly rich and active moment, during which the boundaries between verse and prose were repeatedly renegotiated, elided, and exploited. The verse-prose distinction is seen as both a formal concern, with the rise of free verse and the prose poem threatening to unsettle each side of the divide, and a philosophical distinction with broader rhetorical stakes, as modernity comes to be seen as essentially prosaic.

The poets most deeply involved in these renegotiations—Laura Riding, William Carlos Williams, and Gertrude Stein among others—had widely divergent aims and poetic principles; nevertheless, their shared interest in the margins between verse and prose can be read as a critical response to the philosophical truism that modernity is “prosaic,” and its corollary that prose, not verse, is the mode of language most adequate to giving an account of the modern world.

The chapters examine how three genres at work in the margins of the verse-prose distinction—the prose poem, prosimetrum, and the genre I call the *prosed* poem—offer important insights into aesthetic developments of the time. The chapters

also address methodological difficulties in examining formal effects characterized by the removal or avoidance of poetic shaping, a phenomenon I refer to as “subtractive form.” A theoretical conclusion traces the critical genealogy of the conflation of prose with modernity in much continental philosophy and critical theory backwards through Walter Benjamin and German Romanticism.

In looking through the eyes of Williams, Riding, Stein, and others at the shifting valences of prose, verse, and their various intermixtures, I argue, we must arrive at a less reassuring picture of our grasp of modernity, and may in turn better understand how poets wrestling with the essence of their medium may engage in more open-minded, active philosophical thinking about modernity than some of its most influential chroniclers and theorists.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John Andrew Hicks was born in North Little Rock, Arkansas. He attended Catholic High School for Boys in Little Rock and matriculated to the University of Virginia upon graduation. While at the University of Virginia, he worked on the staff of the *Virginia Literary Review*, eventually serving as poetry editor and then managing editor. He graduated in 2002, earning a B.A. with high distinction in English and also completing a Religious Studies major and a minor in French. In the fall of the same year, he entered the English department at Cornell University, earning an M.A. in 2006 and completing the Ph.D. in 2012. Since 2008, he has worked in the publications department at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, where is currently an assistant editor.

For Betsy
“Hwæt, . . .”

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At Cornell, I have been lucky to be a part of the Theory Reading Group and other, more ad hoc gatherings around shared interests. I have overstayed my welcome talking about ideas in this dissertation at the residences of Alan Young-Bryant, Alexis Briley, Rob Lehman, Audrey Wasser, Alex Papanicolopoulos, Charity Ketz, Douglas McQueen-Thomson, Becky Colesworthy, Robin Sowards, Daniel St. Hilaire, Ben Glaser, Daniel Wilson, Heidi Arsenault, Aaron Hodges, Sarah Pickle, Bradley Depew, and Jess Keiser. In trying to decide whether I should refer to these individuals as friends, colleagues, or brilliant scholars whose work I admire, I am delighted that the choice seems both impossible and a little bit silly. I am braced to learn how rare the community we enjoyed may have been as we continue to disperse.

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listened patiently to many half-cooked ideas, but it was his open-mindedness that ultimately helped me to limit the scope of the project and set its shape. A course with Richard Klein on Oulipo helped sharpen my thinking about formal constraints. I am grateful for his sustained enthusiasm for the project, and also for a memorable conversation in which he dissuaded me from writing on Mallarmé's "Prose pour Des Essientes," at least for now. My committee and the ethos at Cornell in general encouraged me to pursue a wide range of topics, including some that seemed to fall squarely outside the period and nationality of my area of specialization. This work would have a diminished horizon without the guidance of Neil Saccamano and Peter Gilgen on philosophical aesthetics and other aspects of eighteenth-century literature I might not have encountered in a program with more rigid guidelines. Several conversations with Cynthia Chase in the late stages of writing proved inspiring, and helped reassure me that these questions have relevance beyond the immediate project.

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After Cornell, but before completion, I relocated to Los Angeles. I am grateful to Christopher Looby and Eleanor Kaufman at UCLA for assistance with library

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For more than ten years now, and through the duration of this project, Betsy Moriarty has offered brilliant advice, a sharp eye and ear for language, companionship whether near or far, and the occasional reality check. She performed triage on the first and worst drafts of everything, as well as structural advice in later stages. In addition to her influence on the text, her patience when the pages were blank was extraordinary. Her support has been such a constant presence that it has become unfamiliar, a hapax legomenon whose meaning I can only hope to understand by repeating it back. It is a great pleasure to dedicate *A Fairer House than Prose* to her as a small expression of my gratitude.

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INTRODUCTION: *Verse and Prose*

“Par ma foi! il y a plus de quarante ans que je dis de la prose sans que j'en
susse rien, et je vous suis le plus obligé du monde de m'avoir appris cela.”

—Monsieur Jourdain

In Molière, *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*

Act 2, Scene 4

It is difficult to imagine a more fundamental or seemingly self-evident distinction in literary studies than that between verse and prose. Even leaving aside the more problematic third term *poetry*, which often stands in for any kind of imaginative literature (in the sense of “making”), it is clear that the distinction between *verse* and *prose* can only be as stable as the definitions of the terms themselves. In 1679, the English clergyman Samuel Woodford insisted that the blank verse of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* was, in fact, not verse at all but a “poeticall prose.”¹ After re-formatting a passage from Book Four as prose, Woodford exclaims: “Who now in the World could ever dream that this were Verse[?]”² Similar charges of “prose” were made in the nineteenth century, protesting that free verse did not qualify as poetry, or even as verse. Such claims continued into the twentieth century, well after poets and readers had grown accustomed to free verse. In a review of Ginsberg’s *Kaddish*, the poet James Dickey declared the poems—in verse, and now one of Ginsberg’s most

¹ This not a value judgment on Woodford’s part: he greatly admires and praises Milton in the surrounding passages, but Woodford does not believe that blank verse in English is sufficiently distinct from prose to qualify as verse (whereas blank verse is easily distinguishable in Spanish and Italian). Samuel Woodford, “preface” in idem, *A Paraphrase Upon the Canticles* (London, 1679), n.p. (three pages after signature b4). These and other commentary on the status of *Paradise Lost* as verse or prose are discussed at length in Richard Bradford, “The Visible Poem in the Eighteenth Century,” *Visible Language* 23.1 (1989): 9–27. As Bradford also notes, Woodford’s comment predates the remark famously reported by Samuel Johnson—that *Paradise Lost* “seems to be verse only to the eye”—by a full century (Johnson’s “Life of Milton” was first published in 1779).

² Woodford, “Preface,” n.p. For other examples and experiments in reformatting blank verse, see Rosemary Huisman, *The Written Poem: Semiotic Conventions from Old to Modern English* (London: Continuum, 1998), and Bradford, “The Visible Poem in the Eighteenth Century.”

celebrated volumes—to be “strewn, mishmash prose.”³ As Alan Filreis notes in *Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry*, epithets such as “mere prose” and “not poetry” were commonly used as bludgeons in backlash against literary modernism by conservative critics in the 1950s.⁴ What sense of “prose” is meant here, such that these comments form a cogent or even intelligible attack on poems that seem obviously to be in verse? Is the claim that the poems “sound like” prose, because it is difficult to hear line endings without regular rhyme or meter? Or are the poems “prose” because their subject matter is deemed “prosaic,” too lowly for verse? Or perhaps it is the register of language that seems prosaic: too informal or too coarse to qualify. Because prose is defined in opposition to poetry and to verse, some messiness on the part of the poets and the critics is unavoidable and at times intentional. While I try to restrict the discussion as much as possible to the narrower distinction between *verse* and prose, there will be many instances where the slippage between prose and the prosaic, or between verse and the larger sense of poetry, is fundamental to the poetic effect.

The movement of these terms is the focus of this dissertation, which is organized into three main chapters and a theoretical conclusion. With the very

³ James Dickey, “Confession is Not Enough,” review of *Kaddish [and Other Poems, 1958–1960]* by Allen Ginsberg, *New York Times*, July 9, 1961. Dickey’s own poetry at the time of this review tended to have elements of rhyme, meter, and regular stanzaic forms, though his style later loosened. Dickey of course had objections to Ginsberg’s poems beyond their prosody.

⁴ Alan Filreis, *Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry, 1945–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Filreis argues that these attacks led not to the outright suppression of modernism but to the creation of a distorted and revisionary high modernism scrubbed of its leftist affiliations in the 1930s. While all of these antimodernist critics were at least sympathetic to broader anticommunist efforts in the 1950s, and some enthusiastically so, the primary concern of many antimodernists was that the continuation of “bad poetry” and the valorization of obscurity would lead to a poetry that abandoned the communicative function of language, threatening its very integrity.

distinction between verse and prose up in the air for much of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American poetry, prosody and genre theory become crucial tools for identifying and distinguishing these interactions between philosophical ideas and poetic practice. Accordingly, the three chapters of the dissertation are equally as concerned with distinctions of genre at work in the texts under discussion as they are with differences among their authors; each chapter takes both an author and a genre as its primary focus.

The first chapter, “Some Problems Posed by the Poem Prosed,” examines a set of verse poems that oxymoronically or surrealistically announce themselves to be “prose” via prefaces, titles, and with deliberately subdued language. Chief among these is Laura Riding’s *The Life of the Dead* (1933), a set of ten poems composed initially in French and then translated by the author into English in order to cancel out the “poetic excesses” to which each language, in Riding’s account, is susceptible. Riding’s work opens up a dizzying array of issues that result in a catachrestic genre I call the “prosed poem”: a poem stripped of its poetry and rendered prosaic by the author. I discuss the visual aspect of Riding’s poems, which she prints in verse format, in the context of examples from surrealism and Russian futurism, and end the chapter with a discussion of John Ashbery’s prose-formatted *Three Poems* (1972). As a discursive prose work that announces itself as poetry, *Three Poems*, I contend, represents the flipside of Riding’s claim to have transmuted verse to prose. The fact that this generic mislabeling often runs in both directions has led many scholars to propose a third term between verse and prose, such as Northrop Frye’s “associative rhythm,” Robert Pinsky’s “discursive poetry,” or Marjorie Perloff’s “free prose.” I

argue that, while free prose certainly has an important literary history, which Perloff in particular has done much to document (from Christopher Smart to Joyce, Beckett, and Ashbery), that history cannot be separated from the surrounding confusion concerning “prose” itself. Consequently, the critical search for third terms such as free prose is a *result* of verse-prose negotiations, not their resolution or sublation.

The second chapter, “William Carlos Williams and the Poetics of Pace,” discusses the neglected genre of prosimtrum—a text that alternates between verse and prose—practiced most effectively by William Carlos Williams in *Spring and All* (1923). If one strain of American poetry derived from Whitman seems to disregard the distinction between verse and prose, Williams’s use of prosimtrum clearly foregrounds the visual and prosodic differences between the two modes, even while his works unsettle related distinctions such as that between verse “poem” and prose “commentary.” These prosimetric works show Williams working through his much-vexed conception of the poetic line and what Stephen Cushman has called the multiple “meanings of measure” in Williams’s writings. I argue that, while verse has always been the domain of rhythm, and the study of meter its science, it is a vaguer, more general set of observations enabled by the alternation of verse and prose that allows Williams to explore the idea of “pace” most effectively. This focus on the notion of “pace” leads to explorations of time-based theories of meter that were popular in this period, the importance of the automobile for imagining the point of view in much of Williams’s poetry, and the classical figure of the poet as charioteer as discussed in Plato’s *Phaedrus* dialogue. Ultimately, I argue that Williams is concerned with a sense of pace not easily captured by scansion or stopwatch, but a phenomenological sense of

pace that seeks to describe the reader's temporal experience in reading the poems (quickly or slowly) and the poet's pace of observation (glimpsing or gazing), as well as the vulnerability of both to distraction and discontinuity.

The third chapter, "The Curious Case of Stein's *Tender Buttons*," turns to the most familiar site for exploring the distinction between prose and verse, namely its attempted erasure in the genre of the prose poem. I focus on Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914), easily the most difficult and least straightforward text in this study, despite Stein's own claims that the poems are perfectly intelligible word-portraits and the persistent structuring of the poems as definitions. Many readings of *Tender Buttons* have followed clues from her biography as a way into these poems, noting that the work was composed at a particularly significant and tumultuous time in the Stein household. I take a skeptical view of the biographical approach, arguing instead that carefully listening to the puns, wordplay, and repetition of the prose poems is the best available method, though still an inconclusive one. Where many critics have found encoded messages in *Tender Buttons*, I follow persistent images of carelessness, spilling, and accidents to propose readings that arise through seemingly unplanned, accidental associations. Like puns themselves, meaning in *Tender Buttons* is not written so much as discovered in the accidents of language, through close and creative acts of listening. Several poems in the "Food" section, in particular, seem to offer Stein a chance to comment on mundane, repetitive daily activities that engage the topics of boredom, capitalist consumption, and the modernist drive to "make it new" (here in the context of culinary innovation), which have often preoccupied prose poetry since the time of Baudelaire.

The dissertation concludes with a theoretical essay laying out some of the philosophical stakes of the poetic insights arrived at through the chapters.

Methodologically, I insist that each author's approach to the verse-prose distinction is unique and only discoverable as immanent to a specific text and its historical and literary contexts. That immanence, while not abstractable to a larger concept or narrative, can and must be seen as challenging the unexamined philosophical presupposition that only prose, not verse, can adequately describe that messy, fallen world known as "modernity." Ultimately neither verse nor prose is a stable enough category on which to base such an assertion, and yet the pretended stability of the distinction lies at the heart of many claims about the relation of language to modernity.

Taking an essay on Mallarmé by the contemporary philosopher Alain Badiou as a point of departure, I trace the critical genealogy of the conflation of prose with modernity in much continental philosophy and critical theory backwards through Walter Benjamin and German Romanticism. I conclude that the drive to see modernity as essentially prosaic remains so durable because of a wish to believe that style and world can, in fact, neatly coincide; that a damaged world necessitates a damaged, prosaic language; and as a corollary, that any residual beauty in language can be dismissed as nostalgia or dangerous myth-making. The pathos of the claim that a broken world requires broken language conceals a more optimistic (and rhetorically naïve) wish that language can offer a transparent window onto the world as it really is, if we would only renounce the supposed charms of verse and embrace the austerity of prose. In looking through the eyes of Williams, Riding, Stein, and others at the shifting valences of prose, verse, and their various intermixtures, I argue, we must

arrive at a less reassuring picture of our grasp of modernity, and may in turn better understand how poets wrestling with the essence of their medium may engage in more open-minded, active philosophical thinking about modernity than some of its most influential chroniclers and theorists.

Across all of the chapters, then, is an intention to trace the rhetorically complex idea of prose in its formal manifestations in American poetry, focused through the lenses of three poets who are actively engaged with the impact of prose on poetic forms, and to show how this engagement helps them to shape larger ideas about poetry, language, and modernity. Rather than seeking to formulate and then impose a precise definition of prose that applies to all of the works under discussion, the guiding assumption is that these poets do in fact “think in verse,” in Simon Jarvis’s phrase. That is, the philosophical work poets do is not achieved simply by writing poems with philosophical themes or content but through the very form of the poems themselves. As Jarvis writes, of Wordsworth’s aspiration to a “philosophic Song”:

It might mean, not that philosophy gets fitted into a song—where all the thinking is done by philosophy and only the handiwork by verse—but that the song itself, *as song*, is philosophic. It might mean that a different kind of thinking happens in verse—that instead of being a sort of thoughtless ornament or reliquary for thinking, verse itself is a kind of cognition, with its own resistances and difficulties.”⁵

I would extend this to include poems that also work with prose, precisely as another way of illuminating this different kind of thinking. Jarvis’s careful insistence on the

⁵ Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 3–4.

term *verse* is motivated by his desire to foreground formal and prosodic aspects that too often recede in discussions of *poetry*. It is my hope that readers of this work will begin to hear the same insistence on craft as a cognitive matter in my use of the term prose. The hallmark of this different kind of thinking is that it reflects upon its own status as form, including how the individual work might relate to the dense and sometimes contradictory layers of associations deposited over time across the literary history of a given form.

Because the individual chapters seek to read the poems on their own terms, where the history of forms might be largely implicit, it is necessary to make a brief overview here of the long history of prose and the assumptions that have been associated with it over time, as well as an account of the literary history of prose as a poetic form leading up to the turn of the twentieth century. Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, in their remarkable study *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics*, argue that the development of the modern notion of prose can be seen most clearly in cultural shifts that occurred in twelfth-century France.⁶ While classical Latin and Greek authors obviously distinguished between verse and prose, Godzich and Kittay argue that prose functions in a different way in antiquity because it operated under a very different regime of “signifying practices,” the way in which various modes of communication (verse, prose, oratory, dramatic performance, etc.) are assigned relative importance and authority, or seen as more or less appropriate for certain purposes or subject matter

⁶ Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

(governance, religion, history, science, philosophy). Even though the word *prose* derives etymologically from the Latin *prorsus* (straightforward, direct) in a way that seems to comport with the modern usage, the function and meaning of prose can only be determined by how it relates to other signifying practices in a given historical context.⁷ They observe: “All terms must be historicized, but particularly prose because, if we are to follow its common meaning as all that is not verse, its meaning depends on whatever else happens to be there then.”⁸ In antiquity, verse and prose were largely seen as divisions within the signifying practice of oratory, but not in stark opposition as signifying practices themselves; that is, verse and prose were more or less equally available and appropriate for most oratorical contexts. Godzich and Kittay argue that the modern sense of prose emerges when the authority for history-telling shifts from the *jongleur* (the itinerant performer who would recite historical romances) to the authors of written prose histories. In a clear signal of the shift, many of the early prose histories were in fact un-rhymed versions of well-known verse works (known as *dérimages*), which were made by monks or other clergymen on commission from royals or other powerful families seeking to insert themselves into “official” histories of important events in the national mythology.⁹

Other literary historians place the formation of the modern concept of prose at different historical moments, but there is a general consensus that a new meaning of

⁷ Godzich and Kittay discuss this etymology and various aspects of the mismatch with classical notions of prose in the first and last chapters: “Signifying Practice” (3–12) and “The Prosaic World” (187–212); see especially the latter.

⁸ Godzich and Kittay, *Emergence of Prose*, 192.

⁹ With the growing use of documentary evidence in jurisprudence, among many other developments, prose works came to be regarded as more stable and authoritative than verse romances, whose roots were in oral performance. See the chapters “*Dérimage*” (27–45), and “Prose History” (139–75).

prose develops in tandem with the growing use of vernacular languages in written texts. While Alfred the Great did commission prose translations of religious texts into Old English in the ninth century, many historians of the English language place the emergence of prose for modern English in the early modern era. Ian Robinson argues that prose, as language composed of grammatical sentences, cannot have existed before the Reformation-era rise of the discourse of vernacular grammars, and so the concept of a grammatical sentence as opposed to a verse line or a rhetorical period.¹⁰ Paula Blank similarly argues that prose is an invention of the Reformation, as the project of unifying many local dialects under a national *English* language converged with the need for a vernacular translation of the Bible.¹¹ As the verse-prose distinction moved into the eighteenth century, a great and well-documented shift occurred in which narrative writing, previously associated with verseforms such as epic and fable, became re-mapped onto the prose novel. Descriptions of objects, in prose and in verse, shifted away from the stock emblematic objects of allegory toward concrete particulars.¹²

But these historical shifts only make up a part of what we think of as prose.

The process of derhyming and discussions about the status of the vernacular also

¹⁰ Ian Robinson, *The Establishment of Modern English Prose in the Reformation and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).

¹¹ Paula Blank, “‘Niu Ureiting’: The Prose of Language Reform in the English Renaissance,” in Elizabeth Fowler and Roland Greene, eds., *The Project of Prose in Early Modern Europe and the New World* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 31–47.

¹² See Cynthia Sundberg Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Wall traces a multifaceted shift within prose genres themselves in the art of description during the eighteenth century in response to new developments in scientific description (microscopy), changing philosophical attitudes about the universal vs. the particular, the description of consumer products in sales catalogs, and new interest in private domestic spaces.

spawned anti-poetic tracts seeking to discredit poetry for excessive ornament, manipulative appeals to the emotions, or for sacrificing truth and accuracy in the interest of entertainment. These and other anti-poetic attacks often specifically target techniques of versification and the so-called charms of verse. Such arguments of course connect to a long tradition of attacks on and defenses of poetry, one that stretches from classical literature to the present day. One wonders if it wasn't Mario Cuomo but Plato who first observed that politicians campaign in poetry but govern in prose. Implicit in that truism is the widely held assumption that poetry can be inspiring and persuasive, but also untrustworthy, impractical, unconcerned with messy details, and disconnected from the compromises and deal-making necessary to turn an applause line into a piece of legislation. Prose, by contrast, is seen as dull and bureaucratic, but also efficient, capable of technical precision, unpretentious, and more deeply connected to the grittier realities that poetry supposedly smooths over. Needless to say, poets do not necessarily accept these assumptions. But as the relative strengths and virtues of verse and prose have been asserted through attacks, defenses, and in poems themselves, the terms quickly begin to appear on both sides of any attempt at a clear distinction.

A watershed moment for subsequent shifting in the connotations of verse and prose was the establishment of plain, idiomatic speech as a poetic value in Wordsworth and Coleridge's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* at the turn of the nineteenth century. By the Romantic period, the distinction between verse and prose had become intricately entangled in a variable field of oppositions: narrative vs. non-narrative discourse, spontaneous speech vs. composed writing, the ordinary vs. the conventional

or constrained, the common vs. the elite, and the natural vs. the cultivated—to name only a few. These fluctuations in the connotations of the terms verse and prose, it should be noted, developed in parallel to changes in the phenomenal effects such as sound patterning and visual format, which also distinguish the two kinds of writing. Since the advent of modernism, it has become difficult if not impossible to disentangle these aspects of the verse-prose distinction from the larger intellectual context, which so often opposes a versified antiquity of epic or mythology to a prosaic modernity characterized by novelistic particularity or capitalistic instrumentality. This gesture, perhaps originating (and at least enshrined) in Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art* from the 1820s, is repeated so frequently and unreflectively in the literary and philosophical discourses of the past two centuries that one might conclude the distinction between verse and prose to be a constitutive feature of the discourse of modernity as such. Examples of this claim are too numerous to mention, but would include Lukàcs's flat equation of lyric poetry with a nostalgic mythology of "integrated civilization" in *The Theory of the Novel*, Bakhtin's dictum that poetry as such is "monological" (not dialogic), and even the statements of poets, such as Williams's realist critique of meter: "the world is not iambic."

One of the additional difficulties in talking about how prose operates in the context of poetic form is that, compared to other formal techniques, the prose format results in a text that appears *less* formally "shaped." Most formal features of verse—rhyme, alliteration, meter, stanzaic structure, and lineation itself—make the language of the poem *more* structured and more patterned. Accordingly, most scholars assume that formal effects are the result of increased constraints on language. But a

“conscious relaxation of poetic energy” in Laura Riding’s phrase is, in part, what is happening in some prose poems (though certainly not all). Furthermore, the vocabulary of prosody is almost exclusively geared toward tracking these kinds of positive constraints, whereas the formal work of prose is often to remove or avoid some of those constraints. In the subsequent chapters, I refer to this gesture of removal as “subtractive form,” and the term is key to many of the arguments pursued in the chapters. The study of prosody takes pride in accounting for rhythm and other layers of organization with great precision, down to the syllable and phoneme. The blind spot of many systems of scansion, however, is at the level of the general, vague, and somewhat naïve observation: do we read prose at a faster “pace” than verse? Do extremely short lines of verse seem rushed or leisurely compared to longer verses or unbroken prose? If most prose is in fact less organized or patterned than verse, how do we experience and respond to that relaxation of patterning? What are the different claims made on readerly attention by verse and prose? It may well be that, to adapt Eliot’s phrase, the ghost of lineation lurks behind the formal arras of certain prose poems. This is certainly the case with many prose passages in Emily Dickinson’s letters, for example, in which one easily hears the ballad measure of her poems.¹³ The absence of lines may not entirely erase the sense of shape and pattern that lineation provides, but clearly that sense is diminished in prose. This effect of a felt absence of poetic shaping is what I call subtractive form.

¹³ See Stephen Cushman’s discussion in Cushman, *Fictions of Form in American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), 42–74.

The development of subtractive forms such as the prose poem is not unique to American literature, nor does it entirely originate there. Some further comment is due on the Americanness of American poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as some unique features of the period itself. While the central texts discussed are all from the twentieth century, the discussion in each chapter ranges to relevant texts that are not contemporary with those I focus on. The comparison of texts from a generation or two before or after helps put some of the formal observations into sharper relief. In particular, it is difficult to overstate the importance of certain nineteenth-century precursors: Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson set in motion many of the new forms of verse and prose that would collide in later modernist works.

Studies by Mary Ann Caws, Hermaine Riffaterre, and Steven Monte among many others have traced the reception of the prose poem among American modernists via French poets.¹⁴ Ideas about poetry and aesthetics traveled rapidly back and forth across the Atlantic in the nineteenth century; Charles Baudelaire, of course, was deeply influenced by the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, which he translated during the same period in which he wrote the *Petits Poèmes en Prose*. It is also well known that Poe's reputation suffered greatly in the United States in the decades after his death, and the Poe that would elicit polarizing views from later modernist writers was largely received through his enthusiastic French fan base.¹⁵ Barbara Johnson's careful study

¹⁴ To cite only those named above: Mary Ann Caws and Hermaine Riffaterre, eds. *The Prose Poem in France: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983); Steven Monte, *Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French and American Literature* (Lincoln: Nebraska Univ. Press, 2000).

¹⁵ An early and enduring account is Patrick F. Quinn, *The French Face of Edgar Poe* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957).

of the formal and aesthetic resources that Baudelaire found in both verse and prose, and her discussions of prose in Mallarmé (another Poe translator), laid important groundwork for all future studies of the entry of prose forms into modernist poetics from the 1850s forward.¹⁶ I do not re-treat this history *de novo*, though I assume throughout that to think at all about verse and prose in American poetry is a transatlantic endeavor requiring frequent detours through France.

Back in the United States, Whitman welcomed prose into his poetic works in part because of the Romantic valorization of plain speaking (the language of men speaking to men, in the phrase from the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*). That the everyday speech patterns of the American idiom could and should be presented as poetry was precisely the point of Whitman's nationalist poetic project. Whitman's free verse form allowed his writings to pass fluidly from prose to verse contexts. As is well known, Whitman incorporated passages from the prose preface of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 into his later poems with little or no adjustment to their rhythm or phrasing, and his prose writings share many of the same stylistic hallmarks of his verse poems—demotic diction, anaphora, epic catalogs, and direct address.

Of the nineteenth-century American poets, Dickinson is the great partisan of verse. Like Whitman, the styles of her verse and prose writings frequently overlap, but Dickinson's rhetoric about the difference between verse and prose could not be further from Whitman's syncretism. In poems such as "I dwell in Possibility," whose second line I borrow for the title of this dissertation, and "They shut me up in Prose,"

¹⁶ Barbara Johnson, *Défigurations de la langue poétique: La seconde révolution baudelairienne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979).

Dickinson rushes past the traditional arguments in defense of poetry to actively malign prose;¹⁷ this oppositional attitude, too, finds its way forward in the partisanship of later poets' views on verse and prose. Recent studies, with which my own work is in indirect dialogue, have begun to reassess the complexities of genre and genre distinctions in her work, particularly through the way she circulated poems in personal letters to friends and family.¹⁸

The deep history of prose and more recent (Franco-)American literary history are not always present at the surface in the modernist texts I discuss. The chapters that follow do not claim that the details of twelfth-century French prose or the post-Hegelian philosophy of history assert a principal influence on the shape of poems by Stein, Williams, or Riding; nor do they draw direct lines of influence from Baudelaire or Whitman as the primary basis for readings of the later modernist poems. Rather, I argue that an awareness of both the literary history of prose forms and the broader history of how prose came to assume its connotations as bureaucratic, authoritative (and so on), and how these developments set in motion shifts in the meaning of prose's antonyms—verse and poetry—will help us to see more clearly how the poets investigate these topics in poetic terms. I take it as axiomatic, however, that a nuanced poetic account can and should be seen as offering a meaningful contribution to—or

¹⁷ These poems are Johnson 657 (Franklin 466) and Johnson 613 (Franklin 445), respectively, and the earliest known manuscript copies date to 1862. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown, 1961); Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998).

¹⁸ See Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005).

critique of—the prevailing ideas in those other fields whose writers may be more apt to assume their medium as transparent or formally frictionless.

With these wider issues as context, then, this dissertation argues that nineteenth- and twentieth-century American poetry marks a peculiarly rich and active moment, during which the boundaries between verse and prose were repeatedly renegotiated, elided, and exploited in ways that shed new light on the meaning of this fascinatingly mobile distinction. Three of the poets most deeply involved in these renegotiations—Stein, Williams, and Riding—had widely divergent aims and poetic principles; nevertheless, their shared interest in the margins between verse and prose can be read as a critical response to the philosophical truism that modernity is “prosaic,” and its corollary that prose, not verse, is the organizational principle of language most adequate to giving an account of the modern world. The following chapters examine how three genres at work in the margins of the verse-prose distinction—the prose poem, prosimetrum, and the genre I call the “*prosed* poem”—offer important insights into aesthetic developments of the time, and provide a meaningful critique of contemporary narratives of modernity.

CHAPTER 1

Some Problems Posed by the Poem Prosed: Laura Riding's The Life of the Dead

Introduction: Laura Riding

Laura Riding (later called Laura [Riding] Jackson)¹⁹ was an American modernist, most active as a poet in the 1920s and 1930s. Early in her poetic career she was praised by, and loosely associated with, the Fugitive poets (e.g., Allen Tate), who praised her work as “metaphysical.” Later, she began working and collaborating with the poet Robert Graves in London, co-authoring several books and founding the Seizen Press before moving to Majorca, where they continued their work until the Spanish Civil War intervened.²⁰ Prior to a recent renewal of critical interest in Riding's work,²¹ readers who had heard of Riding at all knew of her primarily through

¹⁹ Since I am focusing specifically on Riding's work from the early 1930s, long before her marriage to Schuyler Jackson, I, like many other scholars, will refer to her simply as “Laura Riding,” the name she preferred during her greatest poetic activity, rather than the name she preferred after her marriage to Jackson and renunciation of poetry, “Laura (Riding) Jackson.”

²⁰ Riding at this time became deeply involved in high modernist circles. She maintained a correspondence with Yeats; her first book of poems, *The Close Chaplet* (1926) was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press, and one of the Seizen Press's first volumes was Gertrude Stein's *An Acquaintance with Description*. Riding's relationship to Stein is much discussed. For a brief overview, see Steve Meyer, “‘An Ill-Matched Correspondence’: Laura Riding's Gertrude Stein,” *Raritan* 19.4 (2000): 159–70. Riding and Stein had a falling out when Stein broke off their correspondence over a perceived insult from Riding.

²¹ Riding is now receiving increased attention by scholars of modernism. See, for example, significant chapters on Riding's work in Susan Schultz, *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama Univ. Press, 2005) and Jennifer Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005). See also recent journal articles, e.g. Carla Billitteri, “A Form of Tidiness: Laura (Riding) Jackson and the Work of Poetry-Writing,” *Textual Practice* 22.2 (2008): 315–36; Logan Esdale, “Gertrude Stein, Laura Riding and The Space of Letters,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.4 (2006): 99–123; Jerome McGann, “‘The Grand Heretics of Modern Fiction’: Laura Riding, John Cowper Powys, and the Subjective Correlative,” *Modernism/Modernity* 13 (2006): 309–23; Ella Zohar Ophir, “Toward a Pitiless Fiction: Abstraction, Comedy, and Modernist Anti-Humanism,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 52.1 (2006): 92–120; and Ophir, “The Laura Riding Question: Modernism, Poetry, and Truth,” *MLQ* 66.1 (2005): 85–114.

her association with Graves and one of the books they co-authored: *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1928). Riding and Graves's analysis of Shakespeare's sonnet 129 ("Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame") was cited by William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) as the inspiration for the method he describes and practices in that book.²² As such, Riding's critical writing stands at the very beginnings of what became the New Criticism.

Riding is also well known for her renunciation of poetry, around 1940, on the grounds that poetic language was incapable of the truth-telling to which she aspired.²³ While she once held that poetry, as the most deliberate use of language, was the best vehicle for approaching precision of meaning, she later concluded that the saying would always get in the way of the said; poetry draws too much attention to its rhetorical performance and distracts from the clear presentation of truth.²⁴ Her later prose writings largely involved explaining her renunciation and promoting a one-

²² The details surrounding Empson's acknowledgement constitute a decades-long saga of disputed authorship. In the first edition of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), Empson named only Graves as the author of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, giving him full credit for the "method" he found there, despite Riding and Graves's statement in the preface to the *Survey* that the work was a "word for word collaboration." Riding wrote Empson to complain and to request a correction in the form of an erratum slip, but Empson's replies (in an argument that continued into the 1970s) varied from claiming a) that he really intended to acknowledge a different critical work of which Graves was the sole author to b) that the first edition of the book sold so poorly that he was unable to convince the publishers to spend any further time or money on an erratum slip. Riding and Graves, for their parts, each came to claim sole authorship of the now-famous analysis, and their respective scholars have spilled considerable ink in demonstrating one claim or the other. For a recent account of the controversy, see Lisa Rodensky, "Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*," *Essays in Criticism* 53, no. 1 (January 2003): 54–67.

²³ For a recent reappraisal of Riding's renunciation in terms of her increasingly conservative politics, see the Billitteri essay cited above (Note 2).

²⁴ Riding's most sustained outline of this view appears in *The Telling* (London: Athlone and New York: Harper & Row, 1972). Shorter statements can be found in *The Failure of Poetry, the Promise of Language* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) and the preface and appendices of *The Poems of Laura Riding: A Newly Revised Edition of the 1938/1980 Collection* (New York: Persea Books, 2001).

word, one-meaning view of language that flew in the face of the philosophical and linguistic developments of the twentieth century. For nearly three decades, she refused to allow her poems to be republished, and afterwards she would agree to republication only if she was allowed to include a disclaimer explaining why she no longer supported her poetic works.²⁵ The re-publication, after this long abstention, of her *Collected Poems* in 1980 (and again in 2001), together with a steady stream of reissues of her prose fiction, critical works, and other uncollected poems and writings published since her death in 1991, has been accompanied by a wide array of critical treatments; however, Riding's biography and her renunciation of poetry have received more critical attention than her works themselves. Two of the four book-length studies on Riding have been critical biographies.²⁶

Additional interest in Riding's work has been generated backwards, so to speak, from poets who cite her as an influence. Riding appears regularly (though rarely favorably) in the scholarship surrounding Graves, where she is sometimes referred to as a "witch," a "megalomaniac," or worse.²⁷ Riding was a major influence

²⁵ Scholarship on Riding virtually dried up as a result, to the point that she was nearly forgotten in many mid-century accounts of literary modernism. For an account of her self-decanonization and its effects, see Jo-Ann Wallace, "Laura Riding and the Politics of Decanonization," *American Literature* 64 (1992): 111–26.

²⁶ Barbara Adams, *The Enemy Self: Poetry and Criticism of Laura Riding* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990); Deborah Baker, *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (New York: Grove Press, 1993); Joyce Piell Wexler, *Laura Riding's Pursuit of Truth* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979); Elizabeth Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace: The Life of Laura (Riding) Jackson* (New York: Persea Books, 2005). Friedmann's is the authorized biography, on which she worked closely with Riding (Jackson) until her death in 1991. Both Adams's and Friedmann's biographies, it should be noted, contain sustained readings of individual works, and attempt at least briefly to place each of Riding's works in the context of her poetics and not just her biography.

²⁷ A short list of epithets made against Riding can be found in the preface to Friedmann's biography (vii–xi). For a classic example of anti-Riding scholarship by Graves scholars, see Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The years with Laura, 1926–40* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990).

on the early Auden, who called her “the only living philosophical poet.”²⁸ John Ashbery has acknowledged her as an early influence as well, notably devoting one of his Charles Eliot Norton lectures to her, and Language poets such as Charles Bernstein and Barrett Watten have, while admittedly reading against her own intentions, cited her as a precursor to postmodern poetics.²⁹ Against the view of Riding as a proto-postmodernist, Jennifer Ashton, in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, argues that Riding remains thoroughly modern in her commitment to determinate meaning (as opposed to postmodern linguistic indeterminacy and to New Critical ambiguity).³⁰ Ashton acknowledges that, “as with Stein, the readership largely responsible for moving (Riding) Jackson from canonical margin to center has been the poets and critics of the language poetry movement” (97). And yet:

far from imagining that poems would be the products of readers’ “engagement with writings’ indeterminacies [quoting Steve McCaffery’s *North of Intention*],” (Riding) Jackson spent the greater part of her career, before and after renouncing poetry, defending the idea that any linguistic production, literary or otherwise, could only mean one thing, and that it was, therefore, autonomous...impervious to the effects of individual reader’s engagement with

²⁸ Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, viii.

²⁹ For Ashbery’s lecture, see ““The Unthroned Oracle’: Laura Riding” in John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 95–120. Bernstein wrote the introduction to (Riding) Jackson and Schuyler Jackson’s posthumously published *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words*, edited by William Harmon (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1997). Bernstein regularly lists Riding as a member of the alternative modernist canon that he and other Language poets wish to celebrate, and whom they claim as precursors for later, postmodern developments. Barrett Watten’s dissertation was on Riding and Stein: *Horizon Shift: Progress and Negativity in American Modernism* (Diss. University of California, Berkeley, 1995). In addition to lengthier studies, Riding was an important figure for many of the contributors to the avant-garde poetry journal *Sulfur* (1981–2000), where her work was regularly discussed.

³⁰ See the chapter “Laura (Riding) Jackson and T=H=E N=E=E W C=R=I=T=I=C=I=S=M” in Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 95–118.

it. How then do we reconcile the language movement's affection for (Riding) Jackson with her own complete hostility to everything they hold dear—namely the view of the poem as a “productive field” of “significations”? (Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 97)

Ashton posits an astonishing but persuasive argument: that Riding's renunciation of poetry is entirely consistent with, and even the logical extension of her previous poetic practices. Yet equally compelling is the Language poets' argument that she is, despite her intentions, a champion of indeterminacy (supported, not insignificantly, by their own poetic practices inspired by her work).³¹ Perhaps no other modernist poet has been received with such staggering critical dissensus.

Riding's *The Life of the Dead* (1933) crystallizes these divergent critical attitudes. The work is comprised of ten sets of poems and images. As she relates in an explanatory preface to the work, Riding first conceived of the images and commissioned the painter John Aldridge to produce drawings according to her ideas. Then she produced poems, composed in French (not her native language), to correspond to each of the images. Finally, she translated her own French poems into English.³² The book presents Aldridge's drawings (converted into woodcut prints by

³¹ In a carefully-reasoned turning of the tables, Ashton's continuity thesis ultimately extends to the Language poets themselves. She reads their commitment to the poem as an object of experience to be the logical extension of the New Critical concept of a text-object proposed by I. A. Richards. The materiality of the text (Bernstein) is precisely that which cannot be paraphrased (Richards and Brooks). Ashton writes: “Thus, for Bernstein as for Richards and Brooks before him, the risk that some of the poem's material features might otherwise pass unnoticed is precisely the risk of committing the heresy of paraphrase. And reading will no longer get us around it—that is we avoid the heresy not by reading the poem, but by ‘repeating’ it” (117).

³² See Riding's “Explanation” to *The Life of the Dead* in *The Poems of Laura Riding* (Persea, 2001), 417–18. I will discuss this “Explanation” in depth in the following pages. Hereafter, this book will be cited in-text as *PLR*.

the London engraver R.J. Beedham), followed by the French poem and the English translation. On the one hand, the work can be seen as a playful exercise in procedural poetics, akin to Oulipian language games or Russian futurist experiments with sound translations; by foregrounding the work's arbitrary compositional method, its meaning proliferates indeterminately from the contingencies of its governing procedures. On the other hand, Riding's step-by-step compositional method could be seen as a set of filters for the original idea; by submitting her original conception of each poem through a visual translation, composition in French, and finally re-translation into English, Riding's claimed intention is a work stripped of any poetic artifice, a severe limitation of proliferating meanings. Riding writes: "The phrase 'poetic prose,' which is generally applied in a flattering sense to a degenerate form of prose-writing, may be correctly applied here because the poetic dishabille of the text is willful—a conscious relaxation of poetic energy, not a stylistic orgy in prose" (*PLR* 417–18). Riding's attempt to strip the poetry from her poems, successful or not, operates on several levels at once.

In this chapter, I argue that the two trajectories of this work—towards a revolutionary explosion of meaning and towards a conservative, willful constraint on signification—are two sides of the same gesture: the exploration of the shifting boundaries between verse and prose. First, I will turn to Riding's use of translation in the work, posing the questions of what survives and what is revealed when translation becomes a part of a work's composition. Second, I will explore the question of the genre of this complex work; Riding's counterintuitive claim that a work composed of poems, all printed in lines, should be called "poetic prose" suggests that part of her

conceptual plan for the work is aimed at re-defining the categories “poetry” and “prose” themselves. In the final sections of the chapter I will turn to two works, the Russian futurist artists’ book *A Game in Hell* (1912, 1914) and John Ashbery’s *Three Poems* (1972), to explore the implications raised by works that share some of Riding’s compositional procedures, but use them to serve widely divergent aesthetic aims. At stake will be the de-coupling of a work’s form or genre from its status as a text that is either “open” or “closed” to the readerly co-creation of meaning.

Composition as “Explanation”: Riding on Translation

Laura Riding’s *The Life of the Dead* is in many ways a serious meditation on translation. The poems in the *Life of the Dead* are not the last she wrote, but this book, together with her other 1933 collection *Poet: A Lying Word*, were the last poems she published as separate volumes prior to her 1938 *Collected Poems*. They are typical of her later poems, which show the poet’s growing mistrust of poetic language. *The Life of the Dead* in particular is an attempt to correct for what she saw as the excesses of poetic language without yet giving up on poetry completely.

According to the prefatory “Explanation,” the poems are supposed to “give a ‘literal’ account of the world in which the dead live” (PLR 417). In fact, the first poem elaborates a single extended metaphor, and poems two through five comprise a loose allegory with five principle characters. The sixth through the ninth poems provide general descriptions of the inhabitants of a city in the dead world—their day-time and night-time activities, their feasts, and so on. The final poem returns to the mode of allegory to describe Death itself. It is unclear in what way these highly stylized poetic productions could ever be considered ‘literal’ without reference to Riding’s

explanation. First, though, I will provide a brief sketch of the allegorical characters since they play an important role in establishing the relation between text and image in this work. Riding introduces the cast of characters in the second poem, “Les Trois Âmes des Morts” / “The Three Men-Spirits of the Dead” (PLR 424–31). The first figure is entirely an abstraction: the “unknown goddess, death itself” (PLR 428, l. 6), depicted in Aldridge’s drawing as a flowing, but empty gown floating in air above the surface of a calm ocean (fig. 1). Next, we are introduced to Romanzel, “luckless poet of the dead” who attempts but fails to find a poetry of the living dead; he is shown as a winged, cleft-hooved half-human falling head-first into the folds of the goddess’s dress. The next figure is Unidor, “indifferent to the change from world to other world” (i.e. the world of the living to that of the dead, l. 22–23). Unidor is drawn nude with his back to the viewer, facing his lover, the fourth character, Amulette. This figure, the “little image of death, of dead flesh moulded,” is drawn as a headless nude floating in the background of the scene, surrounded by foliage and thus evoking depictions of Eve (l. 31). Finally there is Mortjoy, glossed as “our gentle favorite...well advised that he is dead, and well pleased,” depicted as a child playing at the foot of Death’s dress (l. 41–42). Each of the five principal characters represents some aspect of Death: its unknowability (the goddess), its silence (Romanzel), its indifference (Unidor), its image (Amulette), and its capriciousness (Mortjoy). The text and the image, read together, present here a compact re-writing of *Genesis* for the world of the dead: the goddess Death is hovering over the waters, attended by a fallen angel (Romanzel) and a devoted cherub (Mortjoy), leaving the affairs of the world in the hands of Unidor and his companion Amulette (shaped from available materials, in this case dead flesh).

Other poems in the sequence concern themselves with the anonymous citizens of a city of the living dead. We learn in the fifth poem “La Naissance des Bébés Morts” / “Dead Birth” (fig. 2), that the indifferent Unidor is the architect of this city, and that Amulette spends a half-hour each morning giving birth to its citizens: “bubbl[ing] babies lazily from her mouth / Like idle smoke-puffs fanatically precise” (PLR 448, l. 32–33). The citizens are a chaotic, murderous mob by day, and mindlessly distracted by entertainment at night.³³

The poems in *The Life of the Dead* do not present an over-arching narrative. Instead, they offer detailed ekphrastic glosses on the episodic scenarios of the illustrations, which have the look of Breughel or Dürer’s morality paintings, although Riding and Aldridge were at pains to distinguish their efforts from “oldworld morbidity engravings.”³⁴ Just as Riding’s poems keep close to the illustrations, Aldridge’s drawings mirror the allegorical nature of the poems—intricately layered, but clear and sharp.

³³ Riding’s world of the living dead, then, bears some resemblance to the “Unreal City” of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, except that there are no allusions to the Grail or Fisher King legends and no hints of a possible resurrection. Where Eliot’s cast of characters—Phlebas, Tiresias, and others—open the poem up by allusion to other literary works, Riding’s one-off characters, like those of Blake’s mythology, are self-contained. Riding’s assessment of *The Waste Land* was, predictably, unfavorable. A note, published in *Chelsea* 69 as “Jottings On *The Waste Land*” reads: “Recitative jargon of diffuse sentiments, associations, literary and other remembrances. Pieces from a museum of lifeless non-identities. The essential shabbiness of the furnishings of his poet’s mental studio. *Golden Bough* ornaments. A whole room decorated in Tiresias.” Laura (Riding) Jackson, “Jottings on *The Waste Land*,” *Chelsea* 69: *The Sufficient Difference: A Centenary Celebration of Laura (Riding) Jackson* (2000): 40. Riding’s critique of allusion as mere ornament and decoration in part explains the lack of explicit references in *The Life of the Dead*, though it is difficult to imagine Riding writing the work without Milton, Dante, and *The Waste Land* in mind.

³⁴ The vast majority of Riding’s letters, manuscripts, and ephemera are housed in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A Kroch Library, Cornell University. Friedmann’s biography contains an extensive list of other libraries with smaller holdings (Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, 465–66). I will cite from the letters in the Cornell University Library collection as CUL, followed by the date of the letter (if available). For this letter, see CUL, December 20, 1932. Later in the same letter, Riding assures Aldridge that the image for “Within the City: Day-time” “does not at all look German and I like it.”

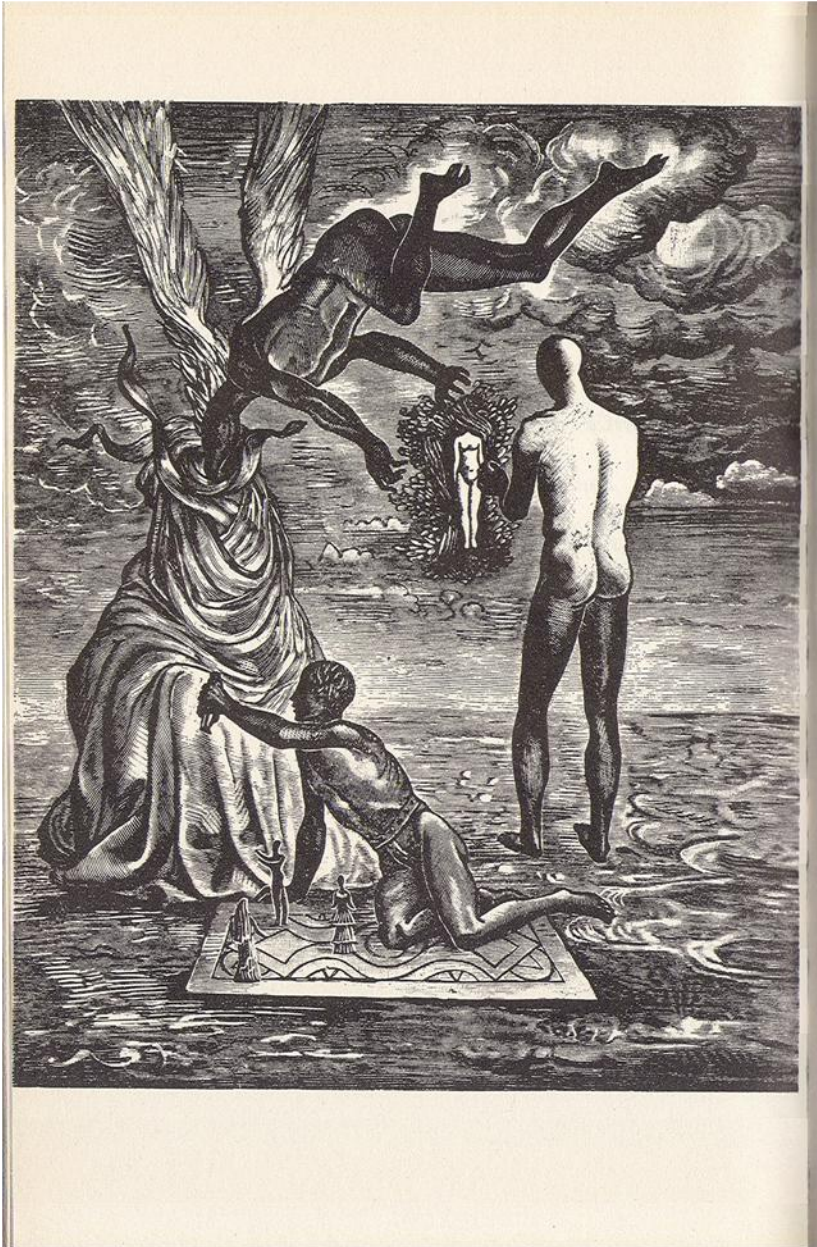


Figure 1. R. J. [Ralph John] Beedham (British, 1879–1975) after John Arthur Malcolm Aldridge (British, 1905–83).

Woodcut engraving for the poem “Les Trois Âmes des Morts” / “The Three Men Spirits of the Dead,” in Laura Riding (1901–91), *The Life of the Dead* (London: Arthur Baker, 1933).

From Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Poems of Laura Riding: A Newly Revised Edition of the 1938/1980 Collection* (New York: Persea, 2001), 424.

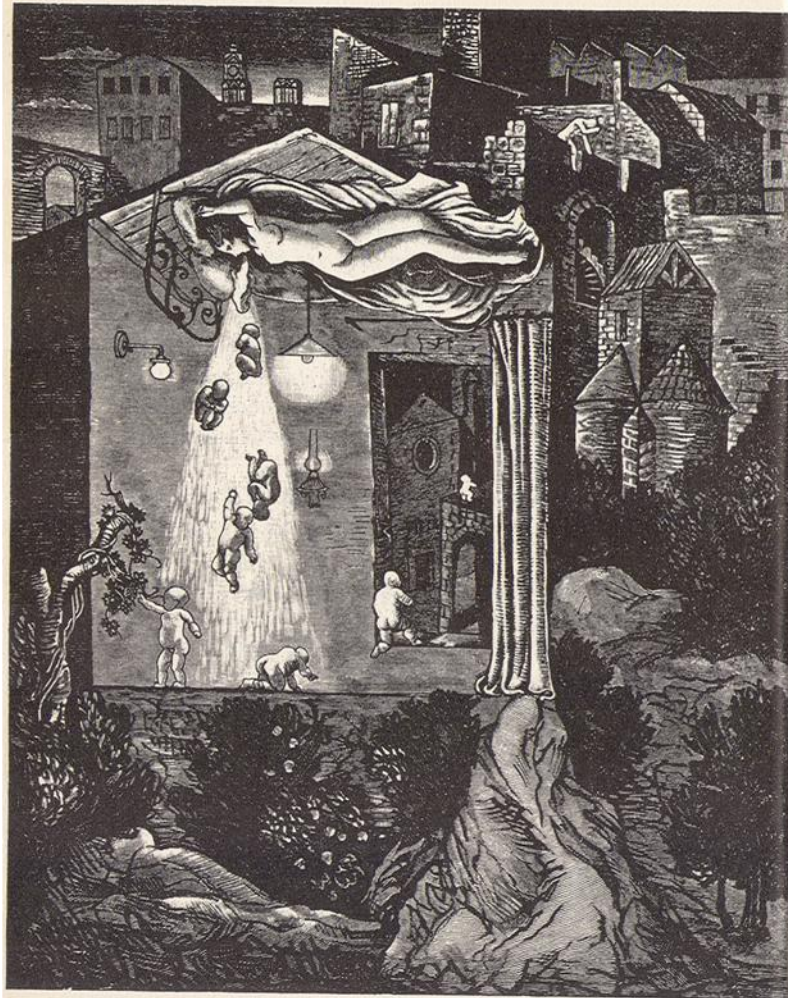


Figure 2. R. J. [Ralph John] Beedham (British, 1879–1975) after John Arthur Malcolm Aldridge (British, 1905–83).
Woodcut engraving for the poem “Le Naissance des Bébés Morts”/ “Dead Birth,” in Laura Riding (1901–91), *The Life of the Dead* (London: Arthur Baker, 1933).
From Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Poems of Laura Riding: A Newly Revised Edition of the 1938/1980 Collection* (New York: Persea, 2001), 444.

While negotiating between text and image is itself a kind of translation, Riding's self-translation from French to English is an equally important element in this work. The content of the poems comes largely from the illustrations, but to find a poetic style for this topic—to write a poetry of the dead—Riding must succeed where her character, Romanzel, fails. The process of translation proves to be the crucial element in creating a deadened poetic language. The procedure for constructing the work is complex, and like many modernist works, her theoretical plan is intended to shape how readers approach the poems that follow. Riding's "explanation" outlines the plan of the work, and the place of translation in it:

The text of this highly artificial poem was first written in French, in order that the English might benefit from the limitations which French puts upon the poetic seriousness of words. For French is a language better adapted than English to the rhetorical naïveté of manner necessary in a 'literal' account of the world in which the dead live—the precision of French being designed to create impressions, of English to convey meanings. [...] The illustrations are the germ of the text: I conceived them before the text, as verbal comedies. Their final form, however, was arrived at by a compromise between the illustrator and myself on the pictorial values of the subjects. These values having been determined, I then made the textual frames out of French—though French is not 'my' language. [...] [M]y object was not to produce a finished literary exercise in French: the French text is merely the critical intermediary between the pictures and the English...as a safeguard against inappropriate poetic seriousness. The phrase "poetic prose," which is generally applied in a

flattering sense to a degenerate form of prose-writing, may be correctly applied here because the poetic dishabille of the text is willful—a conscious relaxation of poetic energy, not a stylistic orgy in prose. (*PLR* 417–18)

If poetry is what gets lost in the translation (in Frost’s phrase), then Riding uses the two languages in this work as a kind of filter for methodically removing all poetry from the poems. In Riding’s formulation, the French composition preemptively avoids the excessive seriousness and realism of English, and by translating the French into English, she avoids corresponding deficiencies in the French language. The French poems should not, however, be considered the privileged or “original” text; they are “merely the critical intermediary between the pictures and the English.” According to Riding, such a method is necessary to give “a ‘literal’ account of the world in which the dead live,” and it has the added benefit of producing what she terms a “poetic prose.” Clearly, the process of translation is working overtime in Riding’s conceptual plan for this work, negotiating not just between two languages, but between text and image; poetry and prose; comedy and seriousness; and between the literal and the figurative.

Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator” provides a useful point of reference for Riding’s outlook on translation.³⁵ The opening pages of Benjamin’s essay develop his ideal of what the best translations achieve: they gain a tiny amount of access to what he calls “pure language” (*reine Sprache*), those qualities of truth (as a kind of “revelation” or “liberation” in the theological and political language that

³⁵ See Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in idem, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 69–82. Hereafter, *Illuminations*.

permeates the essay) shared by, but often concealed or enslaved in, all languages. This concept is an element of Benjamin's somewhat paradoxical notion of a work's translatability.³⁶ A work of art is translatable not due to the ease with which its semantic content is transferred from one language to another, or even its form (exchanging a sonnet in French for a sonnet in English, for example). Meaning, information, and even form are distractions from the larger project of "integrating many tongues into one true language" (*Illuminations* 77). Instead, a work is translatable to the extent that it reveals a "natural...vital connection" between two languages at the level of the "suprahistorical kinship of languages" (*Illuminations* 71, 74).

The guiding spirit of a pure language revealed by this special notion of translation is Rudolph Pannwitz's romantic assertion that a translation is to be judged not by its success in transferring the work from one language to another, but in the degree to which the work translated is shown to alter the target language. Benjamin quotes Pannwitz:

"The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue...He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed, how language

³⁶ The term translatability [*Übersetzbarkeit*] recalls other crucial Benjaminian terms ending in -ability [-barkeit]: reproducibility, communicability, criticizability, etc. For a wide ranging exploration of Benjamin's use of this suffix of potentiality, see Samuel Weber's recent magnum opus, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Harvard, 2008).

differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect; however, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly.” (*Illuminations* 81)

The most successful translations, on Benjamin’s account, are works such as Luther’s Bible, and Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles: these works fundamentally change the possibilities for truth in the target language, revealing previously hidden connections to the pure language. Benjamin’s account of language change, at once historical and idealist, is presented by a series of organic metaphors, and eventually, anthropomorphic ones: growth, maturation, birth, and kinship. Benjamin writes: “Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (*Illuminations* 73). As the birth metaphor suggests, Benjamin’s concept of language-change through translation is a diachronic process that opens up new possibilities within an existing language. Riding’s procedure, by contrast, is a subtractive one, a synchronic process whereby certain (fixed) tendencies within an existing language are closed off by the act of translation from another language with opposing characteristics. Riding shares Benjamin’s dream of a unified common language of truth, but for her it is to be approached through a process of subtraction and limitation, not transcendence.

Benjamin refers to what survives from the original in its translation as the after-life [Nachleben] of the work (*Illuminations* 71–73). He has in mind the common situation of translating a work after it has achieved a certain notoriety: “For a

translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life” (*Illuminations* 71). Riding completely upends this paradigm by incorporating translation into the act of composition itself. The original is not being translated because it has achieved “fame” (afterlife, etc); it is being translated by the same author as a part of the original composition. Likewise for the ekphrastic element of the work—the poems do not relate to existing artworks that independently achieved notoriety; they are all composed together. Perhaps, then, the central feature of the use of translation in *The Life of the Dead* is a radical experiment in temporal flattening—removing the element of temporality from the scene of translation, and removing the questions of history, fame, and notoriety as well. There is no prior notoriety for the artworks or the original French poems. Riding substitutes the historical reception of works of art for the detailed sequence of her own composition procedure. This substitute temporality reflects the self-contained, contracted aesthetic of the work itself. Much like Blake’s invention of the “proverbs of hell,” a text that is printed and circulates within the larger world of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Riding’s new time of translation is an integral part of the alternative world she creates for this work.

In *The Life of the Dead*, the notion of two languages speaking, or language-as-such speaking to itself, is precisely the conclusion that Jerome McGann, the author of one of the only major studies of this work, reaches:

One cannot read the poem without growing conscious of its composed features. Language-as-such rises up as the poem’s central subject. [...] Insofar

as a gap is opened in this text, then, it is opened between text and reader, with the latter encouraged to confront the text as utterly Other. In this way the reader is brought face to face with the word-as-such—with language as the entirety of the scene where truth as an exchange is represented. The writer (Riding) does not dominate (least of all “create”) that scene, she inhabits it; in this sense language—the scene, its world, ourselves—speaks through her.³⁷

McGann here describes the classic notion of the open text promoted by the Language poets, where the reader is actively engaged in the creation of a textual meaning that is fundamentally indeterminate. McGann also seems to graft Benjamin’s views of transformative translation with access to pure language onto Riding’s practice; the phrase “language-as-such” echoes the language in “The Task of the Translator.”

Benjamin proposes a distinction between the work of the poet and the work of the translator, arguing that poet and translator are, in fact, working in two different media. While the poet’s efforts are directed “solely and immediately at specific linguistic aspects” the translator’s efforts are directed “at the language as such” (*Illuminations* 76). Riding herself, however, argues in her explanation that the result of her procedure is a language that is constrained rather than transformed, and a text that is closed and literal rather than open to readerly creation. As we will see, these divergent tendencies towards a closed or open text ingrain themselves at every level of this work.

Riding’s explanation goes on to develop how the qualities of the two languages will work against one another to produce poems without poetry:

³⁷ Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), 133–34.

Indeed, all French writing in poetic form is, strictly speaking, poetic prose. The French are too jealous of their prose to tolerate those liberties which in English result in degenerate prose extravaganzas; and they are not a sufficiently poetic people to achieve, when they write in poetic form, more than judicious prose equivalents to a kind of experience (namely, poetic experience) that is for them necessarily artificial. The usefulness of French in fixing the poetic degree of my outrageous subject suggests that it might not be unreasonable to impose on those writers who have a weakness for poetic prose the discipline of first writing their text in French; so that they must label their English text: 'From the French.' English makes things seem so real. (*PLR* 418)

If allegory involves a literalized presentation of a figure (e.g., Gluttony depicted as a person carrying a huge leg of meat, or even simply the meat itself), Riding's technique goes one step further: the procedure is one of literalizing a cliché, or deadening an already dead metaphor. When Riding conceives of a poem that would benefit from being presented, in a clichéd way, as being "from the French," she literally produces such a text as readily as the allegorist produces the meat.

Riding appears to be operating, tongue-in-cheek, with some familiar *idées reçues*: that English is the language best suited to pragmatic thought, that French is beautiful but can be vague, that German is best suited to philosophy and abstract thought, and so on. As received wisdom, these generalizations are decidedly ungrounded, but Riding, for the purposes of this poetic project, takes these stereotypical language-characteristics seriously. Indeed, these pronouncements on the naïveté of French and the seriousness of English amount to necessary presuppositions

for Riding's procedure to be successful. In order to read this book, one must play along with these clichés; they are the rules of the game. The procedure Riding follows in composing *The Life of the Dead* rigorously tests an hypothesis about language.

Riding engages in this linguistic stereotyping as well as the question of what it means to write English poetry "from the French" well before *The Life of the Dead*. In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* Riding and Graves analyze E. E. Cummings's elliptical poem "Sunset" as an example of modernist difficulty. Ultimately they conclude that Cummings's poem must be a condensed and compacted version of another prior poem and, shockingly, they compose a speculative "source poem" for Cummings's original (or is it now his revision?), re-titling it "Sunset Piece: After Reading Remy de Gourmont." Here, as in *The Life of the Dead*, Riding literalizes the cliché of writing "from the French"—in this case she and Graves "discover" an allusion to Remy de Gourmont's *Litanies de la Rose* in their "expanded" source poem, and frame Cummings's poem as an imitative translation in the manner of Gourmont.

The critical experiment in *A Survey* also produces the temporal flattening of the scene of translation: the poem they invent to comment on Cummings's "Sunset" is given in the form of the supposed (and imagined) original. "Sunset Piece," in turn, invokes yet another prior "original" in the French poet Remy de Gourmont. The "after" in the subtitle is an impossible, virtual (*as if*) temporality. Riding and Graves haven't just rewritten the Cummings's poem; they have rewritten its composition as well. It is an extremely heavy-handed critical intervention, yet the conclusions they draw are entirely legible as a critical commentary on Cummings's text. The process literalizes and concretizes the clichés associated with the character of the French

language. What is at stake is whether Riding's writing "from the French" opens the text up to creative critical gestures or heads them off from the outset, and whether a poetic prose can really achieve the status of a literal account or if the language necessarily escapes Riding's attempted restraint. To explore these questions further we will turn to the look of her poetic prose and then attempt a reading of one of the poems in a way that is sensitive to both Riding's restrictive aims and the openness described by McGann.

The Genre of the Prosed Poem

The first thing, besides Aldridge's images, that strikes the reader who turns the page from Riding's explanation of her achievement of "a poetic prose" is the fact that the poems—both in French and English—are in verse! Prose in verse—here we have the traditional notion of the prose poem (poetic language in a nonlineated, prose format) turned on its head: lineated prose language. The claim is a familiar one to any student of surrealist wit: *ceci n'est pas un poème*.³⁸ Michel Foucault, in his discussion of the famous Magritte painting, frames the contradictory claim in terms of a calligram.³⁹

³⁸ Magritte's first *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* was painted in 1926. Even if Riding and Aldridge were unaware of this specific painting, they were well aware of surrealism in its various manifestations throughout the '20s and 30's. Riding makes scattered but noncommittal references to the movement in her letters. The catalog for an exhibition of Magritte's works, *Magritte and Contemporary Art*, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, makes the point that Magritte's surrealistic vocabulary has been so thoroughly absorbed by today's popular culture—from marketing to *The Simpsons*—that it takes quite a bit of defamiliarizing labor to discern his influence in any one place, or on any one artwork. See Stephanie Barron and Michel Draguet, eds. *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images*. Exh. cat. (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2007), and especially the essays by Michael Govan, Stephanie Barron, Dickran Tashjan, and Noëllie Roussel.

³⁹ See Michel Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983). Foucault's frame of reference is French-language poetry, and Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* in particular, but there is a long history of shape poetry in English, from Herbert to Hollander. For a critical overview, and for some contemporary examples, see John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Sense of Poetic Form*, 2nd ed., (New Haven, Yale UP, 1985), and his *Types of Shape*, 2nd expanded ed., (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991). For a more art-historical approach to the calligrams of Apollinaire,

Foucault posits a hypothetical narrative of the painting's genesis as a calligram that eventually becomes obscured or "unraveled": "Behind this drawing and these words, before anyone has written anything at all, before the formation of the picture...we must assume, I believe, that a calligram has formed, then unraveled. There we have evidence of failure and its ironic remains."⁴⁰ What Riding provides in her lineated "poetic prose" is a more subtle and less-immediately jarring calligram in which the prose text is arranged in the shape of a (lineated) poem. As Foucault points out, the image formed in the calligram is itself unreadable:

For the text to shape itself, for all its juxtaposed signs to form a dove, a flower, or a rainstorm, the gaze must refrain from any possible reading. Letters must remain points, sentences lines, paragraphs surfaces or masses—wings, stalks, or petals. The text must say nothing to this gazing subject who is a viewer, not a reader. As soon as he begins to read, in fact, shape dissipates. All around the recognized word and the comprehended sentence, the other graphisms take flight, carrying with them the visible plenitude of shape and leaving only the linear, successive unfurling of meaning—not one drop of rain falling after another, much less a feather or torn-off leaf. [...] [T]he calligram never speaks and represents at the same moment. The very thing that is both seen and read is

see Willard Bohn, *Apollinaire, Visual Poetry, and Art Criticism* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1993), and his earlier *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry 1914–1928* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986). Dick Higgins offers a historical survey of pattern poetry before 1900 in Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, 20. In Foucault's "before" we can easily recognize Riding and Graves's technique of inventing a hypothetical "draft" as a critical tool for explaining the finished, extant work.

hushed in the vision, hidden in the reading. (Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, 24–25)

Riding's calligram of a poem, then, takes the visual shape of a poem in verse; its points and lines form the outlines of verses and stanzas. If it is a prose text, it is also a drawing of a poem. But according to Foucault's analysis, it is unreadable *as* the poem it represents visually. Our inability to read the poetic-prose-in-verse as a poem immediately raises the question: What, if not a poem, is the genre of *The Life of the Dead*?

To call poetic prose in verse a "prose poem" ignores the visual formatting of this highly visual text. Instead, I am provisionally grouping these texts under the heading "prosed poem."⁴¹ The past participle "prosed" of the verb *to prose* indicates the *procedural* aspect of this genre (hence my interest in Foucault's fictional account of the unraveled calligram prior to Magritte's actual painting). Riding's prosed poems are not simply a one-shot example of a generic catachresis: the prosed poem label could be extended to name the condition of all poems under translation as a compositional procedure.⁴² The invented "draft" poem for E. E. Cummings's "Sunset,"

⁴¹ Some of the inspiration for this term is due to Jerome McGann, who refers, in passing, to Riding's practice of 'prosing' the verse in *The Life of the Dead*. See McGann, *Black Riders*, 133.

⁴² Baudelaire's prose poem "L'Invitation au voyage," seen as a prose "translation" of his verse poem of the same name, might count as an early instance of the genre. His prose poem "Un hémisphère dans une chevelure" presents a more complicated case, as it clearly relates both to "Parfum exotique," which appeared before the prose poem, and "La chevelure," published two years after "Un hémisphère." The most influential account of the poems for which Baudelaire wrote both verse and prose versions is Barbara Johnson, *Défigurations de la langue poétique: La seconde révolution baudelairienne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979).

More recently, John Ashbery has practiced Riding's specific method of self translation between French and English in the "French Poems" of *The Double Dream of Spring*. While the French source texts are not published alongside their English translations, Ashbery did publish the French poems in *Tel Quel* 27 (Autumn 1966): 29–32. For an excellent discussion of these poems, see Sara Lundquist, "Legerete et Richesse: John Ashbery's English 'French Poems,'" *Contemporary Literature* 32.3 (Autumn, 1991):

discussed above, is a member of genre as well, suggesting that the prosed poem has uses both as a poetic procedure and as a tool for practical criticism. Where Riding refers to the French text of her own poems in *The Life of the Dead* as the “critical intermediary between the pictures and the English,” Riding and Graves invent the source poem “Sunset Piece” for an even more directly critical purpose.

Riding’s *The Life of the Dead* contains within it a critical gesture; it is divided from itself. The result—a double work—is not a new hybrid genre that blurs the boundaries between verse and prose. Instead, Riding grafts a certain idea of prose onto the visual format of verse, retaining the distinction in a productive tension that forces verse and prose to co-exist simultaneously. In fact, the procedural poetics of this work tends towards this uneasy simultaneity at every turn: text and image, French and English, original and translation, verse and prose. Perhaps, then, the appropriate figure for the prosed poem is not catachresis, but zeugma: it is not so much a matter of mislabeling the text as verse or prose, but of yoking the two together in spite of their differences.

Riding’s text is working at the level of basic generic distinctions between verse and prose, original and translation, but much happens at the surface level as well. “Le Coeur sec” / “The Dry Heart,” the first poem in the sequence, introduces some of the practical challenges to reading the poetic clusters along with their illustrations.

403–21. Lundquist does not mention Riding as a likely precursor for Ashbery’s exercise, but others have, e.g. Lisa Samuels, *Poetic Arrest* (Diss., Univ. of Virginia, 1997) 143n48.

<p>Le Cœur sec</p> <p>Le monde où vivent les morts est un Cœur sec.</p> <p>Tout monde est un cœur, un rythme sphérique,</p> <p>Un rythme de volontés impossibles</p> <p>Qui se chantent et s'imaginent s'entendre.</p> <p>Le monde où vivent les morts est un chœur silencieux.</p> <p>Il ne s'entend pas, ni se chante.</p> <p>Ses volontés sont devenues de froids souvenirs,</p> <p>Noirs comme le sang qui ne court plus.</p> <p>Gonflé d'une douleur qui ne fait pas de mal,</p> <p>Le monde où vivent les morts est un cœur vivant</p> <p>Dans un corps qui n'est plus.</p> <p>Les morts ne vont ni en enfer, ni au ciel.</p> <p>Ils continuent à vivre comme ils ont vécu.</p> <p>Le monde où vivent les morts est un cœur sec,</p> <p>Le même cœur que toujours, bien que sec.</p> <p>(PLR 421)</p>	<p>The Dry Heart</p> <p>The world where the dead live is a dry heart.</p> <p>Every world is a heart, a rhythm spherical,</p> <p>A rhythm of impossible intentions</p> <p>That yet sings itself, imagining heard music.</p> <p>The world where the dead live is a silent choir.</p> <p>It does not hear itself, it sings itself not.</p> <p>Its will has frozen into memory,</p> <p>Black as still blood, without flow.</p> <p>To the painless sorrow of death it throbs.</p> <p>The world where the dead live is a heart alive</p> <p>In a body once alive.</p> <p>The dead move neither into heaven nor hell.</p> <p>Their afterwards is their before.</p> <p>The world where the dead live is a dry heart,</p> <p>The same heart as always, even dry.</p> <p>(PLR 422)</p>
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To read this “poem” as a legitimate poem is to read that which is lost in the passage from French to English: the lost sonic resonance of “heart,” “body,” “choir,” and “flow” from the French (coeur, corps, chœur, and ne court plus) refuses any phonetic connection between the poem’s central determinations of the world in which the dead live as a dry heart in a dead body, and as a silent choir whose will (figured as blood) no longer flows. There is a shift in agency in line four which, in French, has the “volontés impossibles / se chantent et s’imaginent s’entendre.” In English it is the “rhythm” that “yet sings itself, imagining heard music.” What is elided between the

English phrasing and, in a more literal rendering of the French, the assertion that “every world is a rhythm . . . of impossible intentions that sing themselves and imagine themselves hearing/understanding themselves”? Riding here drops the syntactic parallelism between the will of “every world” (lines 2–4) and the frozen wills of the dead world (lines 5–8). By deleting this syntactical parallelism in the translation, she drives the two worlds further apart. Likewise, in removing the two instances of the verb “vivre” (to live) in line 13 (“ils continuent à vivre comme ils ont vécu” which alters to “their afterwards is their before” in the English, Riding shifts the focus of the poem(s) from a simple paradox of living death to a temporal problem—an eternity without change, which may as well be the same moment over and over again. Riding leaves behind, in the French text, a more tightly organized meditation. By loosening the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic parallels in the English version, she deliberately deletes these traditionally “poetic” resources of signification from the finished text.

But to read “The Dry Heart” as a legitimate poem is to ignore its illegibility as only the calligram of poem. To read the non-poem (the prosed poem) that Riding insists upon is to read only what remains after the subtractive process of translation: not the phenomenal features of either poem, but the sheer fact of the poem’s lexical repetitions. What remains visible in the visual outlines of both poems are the repeated words and phrases that occur the same number of times in both poems: the world in which the dead live (four times); heart (five times); dry (three times). Dry, dead, heart, and world: such is the non-poetry of living death; no poetry is possible, least of all that which could serve as a reminder of life, or the feeling of being alive. The generic

simultaneity that Riding insists upon between poetry and poetic prose produces these divergent conceptualizations of just what is legible in *The Life of the Dead*. At the same time, the genre establishes (and aids in describing) the resultant incompatibility of these two versions of what, by now, can hardly be said to be “the same” text.

What is a dry heart, a heart without moisture? There is little sense of motion or beat in these largely end-stopped lines that look to the eye as though they could be in pentameter but studiously avoid such regularity with a jumble of duple and triple rhythms and anywhere from three to six beats per line.⁴³ Perhaps Riding is refusing the familiar comparison of poetic meter to the rhythm of the heartbeat, despite the assertion in line two that every world is a heart and every heart is a rhythm. This dry heart “sings itself not,” in a direct rejection of Whitman’s triumphant I. The blood is frozen, black and “still, without flow.”⁴⁴ Riding’s proposed revision to the ninth line of the English, which arrived at the printing press too late to make it in to the published text, clarifies how she wished to present the rhythm of the dry heart: instead of “To the painless sorrow of death it throbs” she would have preferred: “To the painless sorrow of the dead it throbs” (CUL March 28, 1933). If poetic rhythm is a heart that beats, then prose is a wound that throbs. In place of the abstract throbbing of death’s sorrow, Riding would substitute the disorganized, collective throbbing of the dead. The heart is dry, silent, and without flow, but still it throbs, still is alive—“the

⁴³ The French lines are more regular—loose but audible *decasyllables*—though they too avoid the traditional hiatus (after the fourth syllable) that would mark these lines as metrical in French prosody.

⁴⁴ Though McGann himself does not make this point, his analyses elsewhere in *Black Riders* would suggest reading the blackness of the blood as a transition from blood to ink, refusing the metaphor of blood in favor of a direct, literal reference to the materiality of the ink on the page. He reads the “typographic wit” of Stephen Crane’s *Black Riders and Other Lines* (1895) in precisely this way, as an “awareness of poetry as a system of material signifiers” (McGann, *Black Riders*, 91–94).

same heart as always, even dry.” Riding’s heart has a rhythmic throb without a beat: the minimal, and by her account, meaningless and will-less rhythm of sheer repetition that winds up in a bad infinity of the eternal same.

The poems move between conflicting codes: phonetic resonance and its dissolution, metaphor and literalism, beat and throb. As a calligram, the text is merely an unreadable drawing of a poem. As a translation, the poem is what gets lost in the move from one language to another. What survives the process of translation is a series of repeated words and phrases. The resonance of the work derives not from blurring generic boundaries, but from the fact that the alternatives available—poem, prose, translation, calligram—are mutually incompatible.

John Aldridge’s woodcut for “The Dry Heart” could not reflect these issues more clearly (fig. 3). Against a deeply shaded background, we see an image of a heart inscribed within a white circle, presumably evoking the description of every world as a “rhythm spherical” in line 2 of the poems. Aldridge, though, draws a circle, not a sphere. In an echo of the subtractive operations at work in the text, he flattens three dimensions into two. Furthermore, the heart is not in the shape of an anatomical heart, but rather the familiar, even vernacular, heart-shape with two roughly symmetrical lobes. Superimposed upon the emblematic, vernacular heart-shape is a vaguely anatomical network of veins and arteries, but it is unclear what purpose they serve since the figurative heart clearly doesn’t function as a blood delivery system. Just as in the poem, the image is caught between multiple languages, negotiating between a poetic-emblematic idiom and a prosaic-anatomical language of detail.

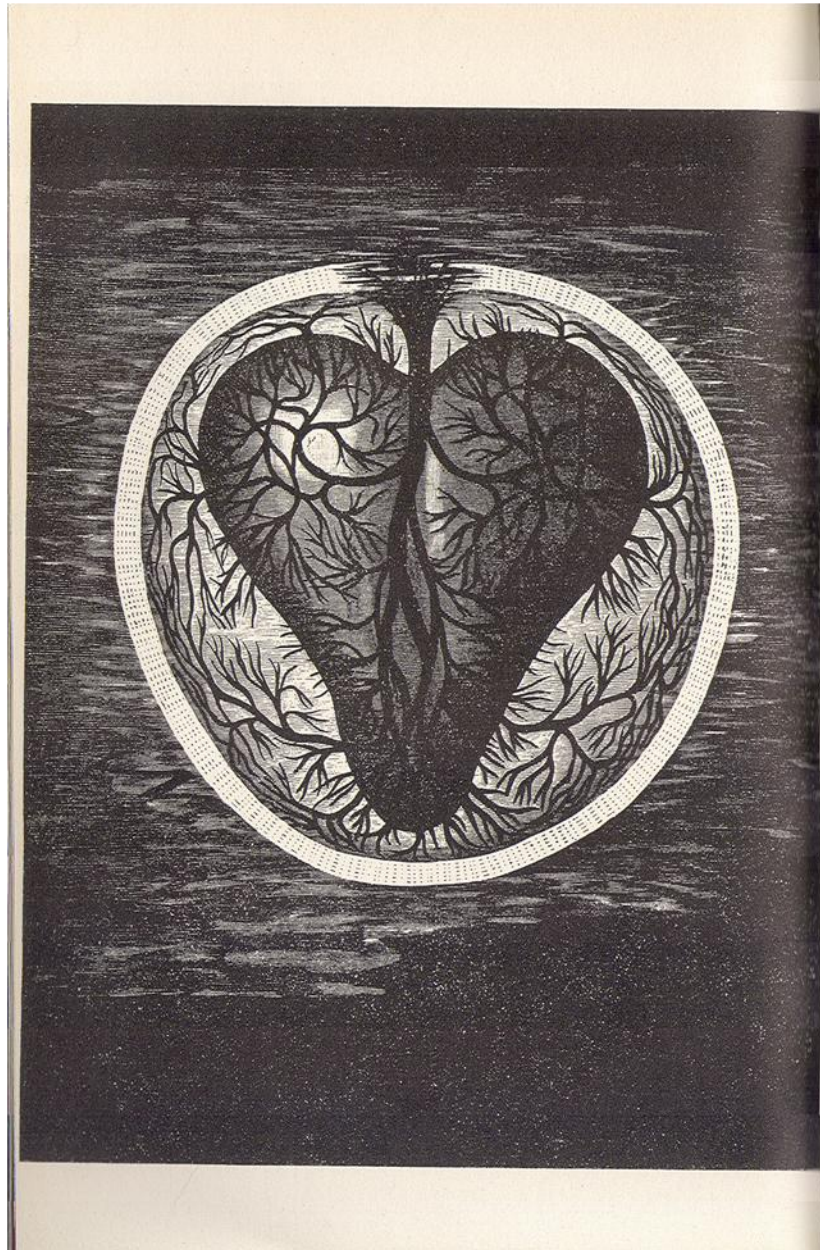


Figure 3. R. J. [Ralph John] Beedham (British, 1879–1975) after John Arthur Malcolm Aldridge (British, 1905–83).
Woodcut engraving for the poem “Le Coeur Sec” / “The Dry Heart,” in Laura Riding (1901–91), *The Life of the Dead* (London: Arthur Baker, 1933).
From Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Poems of Laura Riding: A Newly Revised Edition of the 1938/1980 Collection* (New York: Persea, 2001), 420.

At each level of the poems—phonetic, syntactic, generic, and linguistic—we are confronted with two possible trajectories: one towards an open, productive text and another towards a closed, determinate one. Where the illustration might have offered a way of negotiating these tensions, we find that it is beset with its own internal conflicts. By using translation as an integral part of the work’s composition, Riding has either broken through to the plane of language-as-such (in McGann’s Benjaminian reading) or she has reduced the intersection of two languages to a single point. In giving two texts for each poem, either she has ensured that the meaning of each poetic cluster cannot possibly be singular, or she has insisted on a result that is, by design, less than the sum of its parts. And in framing the texts as both verse poems and poetic prose, either she has untethered the result from even the most basic generic assumptions we can make about texts—is it verse or is it prose?—to forge a new kind of writing with no conventional constraints or expectations, or she yokes verse and prose together to the point where the only formal feature that remains in the work is the simultaneity of sheer repetition.

Both readings are possible, and readily arguable on the basis of textual evidence. This impasse leads us to draw important conclusions about the significance of form in a text of this kind. Form, it turns out, cannot on its own settle the question of whether Riding’s is a radically open or radically closed literary work. In the military idiom of the “avant-garde” we might say that form is merely a tactic—one that can be used in service of a larger strategy of achieving a radically open or radically closed text; form alone cannot guarantee success.

Playing Cards and Players

Riding's pursuit of conservative aims through otherwise avant-garde practices can be seen quite clearly in another poem from the sequence: "A l'Interieur de la Ville: de Nuit" / "Within the City: Night-time" (*PLR* 456–61). In the daytime of the poem that precedes it in the sequence, the people of the dead city had been a violent mob, "crying vengeance on themselves" ("Within the City: Day-time," *PLR* 453). The citizens, a curious amalgamation of medieval warriors and modern city-dwellers, set about killing one another with an equally diverse array of weaponry. In the foreground of Aldridge's image (450), one figure is being impaled on a barbarian's sword while just to the right another figure is dragged through the streets behind an automobile. These murderous techniques, medieval and modern, find their synthesis in the partially clothed body hanging from a lamppost, evoking the all-too-modern lynchings in Riding's contemporary America. Riding's poems describe these scenes grimly, with the slightly bemused detachment of an urbane travel writer giving advice to prospective tourists. The practice of dragging a body behind the car is described as "the most delicate prank in vogue," while "the great bonfire signaling the middle of the square / is not a sight to claim much of your time" (454). Likewise, the lynching gets short attention; Riding merely reports that the street lamp itself is "très connu" for its "renowned convenience [l'endroit favori] of impromptu hangings" (452, 454). After a few more brief descriptions of the city's violent fashions, Riding's narrator pulls her tourist out of the scene and abruptly ends the poem: "But, come, these are indeed palling frivolities [des niaseries] / In which the dead themselves take little interest" (452, 455).

Already bored with the violent spectacles, when night falls the city turns to other forms of entertainment. “Within the City: Night-time” opens with the following scene:

At night a city narrows into a populous café.
At night the city of the dead becomes a shrunken framework
Into which pour mincingly those uninspired wanderers.
All are but apathetic game-automata now.
(459, l. 1–4)

These short lines establish an indoor scene, but it is Aldridge’s image that effects the transformation of the city and its population most completely. In Aldridge’s image, there are no human figures; the citizens of the city of the dead have been rendered allegorically as game pieces: dominoes, playing cards, chess pieces, and a self-winding gramophone (fig. 4). No group of pieces, however, is actually playing its respective game: the cards arrange themselves idly around the bar, the chess pieces dance on their board, or rather, “they circulate in patient form, according to the rules” (l. 28). The dominoes arrange themselves around a roulette wheel. Riding’s non-playing game pieces, then, represent a second-order boredom in which the games themselves must seek diversion and entertainment. Furthermore, each game is segregated from the others: the chessmen are tied to their board, and the cards and dominoes stand in separate groups. Riding and Aldridge could have presented an anarchic scenario in which all the games mingled together, subverting the rules that govern their movement. Instead, the pieces remain grouped together, and so they must maintain the hierarchies of rank internal to each game. Riding, in the poems, is at

pains to minimize any potential enjoyment or raucousness in this seemingly festive scene. The patrons of the bar (city-dwellers transformed into playing cards), she informs us, are not big drinkers, nor do they express any sexual interest in the barmaid, the Queen of Hearts (l. 9–12). Instead, they are “as chaste as shop-new playing cards no yet dealt out...little more themselves than fugitives of the pack” (l. 14–15). Riding’s spare style is on full display here: thanks to Aldridge’s image, the allegorical transformation of people into playing cards is already complete, so the analogy spans no distance whatsoever—the playing cards are described as being like playing cards. Even though this poem represents one of the most fantastic scenes of the sequence, Riding remains true to her spare literalism: “You must understand that the cards are mere cards, / The dominoes have not really left their box, / The chessmen are but idling curios.”⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ *PLR* 460, l. 32–34. The French text of these lines reads: “Il faut comprendre que les cartes ne sont que des cartes, / Messieurs les Dominos ne sont pas vraiment sortis de leur boîte, / Les pièces d’échecs sont des curions désœuvrés” (459).



Figure 4. R. J. [Ralph John] Beedham (British, 1879–1975) after John Arthur Malcolm Aldridge (British, 1905–83).

Woodcut engraving for the poem “A l’Intérieur de la Ville, de Nuit” / “Within the City: Night-time,” in Laura Riding (1901–91), *The Life of the Dead* (London: Arthur Baker, 1933).

From Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Poems of Laura Riding: A Newly Revised Edition of the 1938/1980 Collection* (New York: Persea, 2001), 457.

The thematic elements of this scene bear a striking resemblance to another modernist visual-poetic work: the Russian futurist collaboration *A Game in Hell* [*Igra v adu: Poema*] (1912, 1914).⁴⁶ In the first edition of this work, the poets Velemir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh collaborated with the artist Natalia Goncharova to depict a card game between devils and sinners. The narrative of this game, though, is difficult if not impossible to follow, due to Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov's technique of "stringing along" [*nanizyvanie*] the poetic fragments without respect to logical or poetic sequence.⁴⁷ The books themselves were hand-printed lithographs on cheap paper; likewise, the text was not typeset but handwritten in characters resembling an archaic Slavonic font.⁴⁸ In one of their many manifestos from this period, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov advocate producing handwritten books in collaboration with artists:

If you ask a write-wright, a real writer, he'll tell you that a word written in one particular handwriting or set in a particular typeface is totally distinct from the same word in different lettering. [...] Two circumstances obtain:

⁴⁶ Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velemir Khlebnikov collaborated on the poems in both editions of the work. Natalia Goncharova provided the drawings for the 1912 edition of *A Game in Hell*, while Kazimir Malevich and Olga Rozanova supplied the images for the 1914 edition. Both editions were on view at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in 2008/9 for the exhibition *Tango with Cows: Book Art of the Russian Avant-garde, 1910–1917*, curated by Nancy Perloff. There is no printed catalog, but the exhibition has an excellent website: http://getty.edu/art/exhibitions/tango_with_cows/. Another extensive resource for Russian book art is the catalog for the MoMA exhibition *The Russian Avant-Garde Book 1910–1934* (MoMA, 2002). For the Getty exhibition, the GRI digitized a number of the holdings in Russian avant-garde book art, which are also available online through the GRI website. The translation of the 1912 edition of *A Game in Hell*, by Allison Pultz and William Gunn is, to the best of my knowledge, the first English translation of this work. It is available as a web resource for the exhibition: http://getty.edu/art/exhibitions/tango_with_cows/slideshow.html. References to this translation will be cited in-text as Pultz and Gunn.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this method, see Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986): 150.

⁴⁸ See Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 40–42, and Markov, "The Literary Importance of Khlebnikov's Longer Poems," *Russia Review* 19.4 (1960): 338–70.

1. Our mood alters our handwriting as we write.
2. Our handwriting, distinctively altered by our mood, conveys that mood to the reader independently of the words...It's clearly not necessary that the author himself should be the one who writes a handwritten book; indeed, it would probably be better for him to entrust that task to an artist. But until today there have been no such books. The first ones have now been issued by the Futurians.⁴⁹

While the futurists did not produce a specific “explanation” outlining their collaborative processes in *A Game in Hell*, this contemporary manifesto gives some indication of the level of detail at which the poets and artists were collaborating. Furthermore, if we grant the premise that a handwriting style or typeface can alter the “mood” of a text, we could speak of the handwritten text of *A Game in Hell* as a kind of “translation” of the original. Along with the thematic parallels, it appears that there are compositional analogues as well between *The Life of the Dead* and *A Game in Hell*. Descriptive passages from the Russian work strongly suggest that the poems and images were made in concert. One description of the card players reads:

The cross-eyed one in glasses sat here

Tickling his armpit with his tail

Lame, bald, slavish.

One without eyebrows, one without a shoulder. (Pultz and Gunn 3)

⁴⁹ Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, “The Letter as Such” in Khlebnikov, *The King of Time: Poems, Fictions, Visions of the Future*, edited by Charlotte Douglas, translated by Paul Schmidt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 121–22. They preferred the term “futurian” to “futurist” because they insisted that they had preceded and influenced Marinetti and the Italian futurists, not the other way around.

Goncharova's neo-primitivist image for this page shows a figure at right whose shoulder is cropped out of the drawing, and another whose eyebrows are likewise cropped out of the visual field (fig. 5). Kruchenykh and Klebnikov allow their character descriptions to be strongly influenced by what was available to them in Goncharova's illustration and vice versa. The image and text take one another quite literally; what appears accidental in the cropping of Goncharova's drawing gains an air of necessity from the poetic text (or perhaps it is the other way around).

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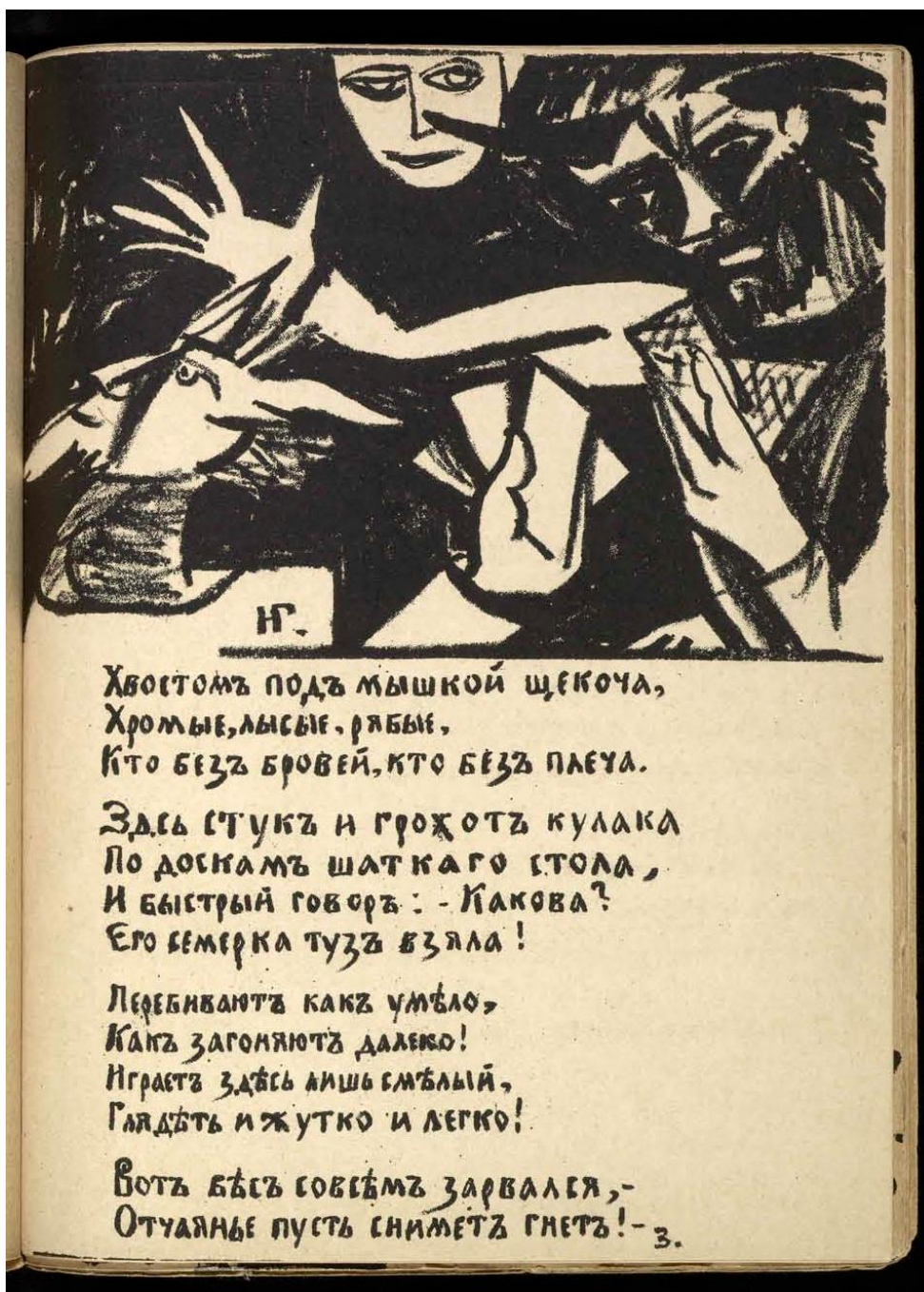


Figure 5. Drawing by Natalia Goncharova (Russian, 1881–1962), with poetry by Velemir Khlebnikov (Russian, 1885–1922), and Aleksei Kruchenykh (Russian, 1886–1969). Lithograph print.

From Aleksei Kruchenykh, et al., *Igra v adu [A Game in Hell]*. Poetry by Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velemir Khlebnikov; illustrations by Natalia Goncharova. Moscow, 1912.

For the 1914 edition, Kruchenykh and Klebnikov revised and expanded the text in conjunction with a new set of drawings by Kazimir Malevich and Olga Rozanova, who chose to illustrate the poetic material in a cubist style. In Malevich and Rozanova's illustrations, the playing cards—a favorite cubist topos for their flat profiled perspective—become larger, more important, and begin to merge with the players. In some intertextual designs, the suits (hearts, diamonds, spades, and clubs) appear free-floating, drawn from multiple lines of perspective and freed from the frame of the playing cards. In one illustration a cubist woman plays at cards, her face depicted from two different angles (fig. 6). These two faces, drawn in profile at near-right angles to her body, powerfully evoke the flattened profile of a face card, making it difficult to distinguish the playing cards from the player. She is drawn against a shaded background in the shape of a diamond, further confusing the levels, and the scale, of the card scene. Thus, both Riding and Aldridge's allegory and Rozanova's cubo-futurist reduction of the card game ultimately achieve a pictorial identification of playing card and player. Nevertheless, the confusion of levels and hierarchy in the cubist print is precisely what Riding and Aldridge refuse to produce in their stark and orderly scene ("the dominoes have not really left their box"). *The Life of the Dead* and *A Game in Hell* present the infernal card game in three distinct visual styles: Aldridge's neat allegory, Goncharova's neo-primitivism, and Rozanova's cubist layering. Each of these, in turn, is paired with a poetic text that follows closely the artist's visual cues.



Figure 6. Drawing by Olga Rozanova (Russian, 1886–1918). Lithograph print. From Aleksei Kruchenykh et al., *Igra v adu* [*A Game in Hell*]. Poetry by Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velemir Khlebnikov; illustrations by Kasimir Malevicha and Olga Rozanova. St. Petersburg, Russia: EUY, 1914.

Beyond the striking resonances in content between the two works, Riding also shares a formal tactic with the Russian futurists: the use of translation as a compositional procedure. In addition to their theory of mood-altering typefaces, the poets of *A Game in Hell* also created the poetic style for which the Russian futurist movement is best known: *zaum* poetry (commonly translated into English with the portmanteau term “beyondsense”). One of the major tenets of *zaum* poetry, as outlined in Kruchenykh’s “Declarations of the Word as Such,” has to do with rejecting the “common” language in favor of a private, free, and transrational language that “does not have a definite meaning (is not frozen).”⁵⁰ Kruchenykh continues:

3. A verse presents, unconsciously, a number of series of vowels and consonants. These series are untouchable. It is better to substitute for a word one similar in sound, rather than one similar in idea. 1. New verbal form creates a new content, and not vice versa.⁵¹

This new poetic language, based on the pure sounds of words, would bypass “thought and speech” to directly express the emotional experience of the inspired artist (*RF* 130). Furthermore, as Kruchenykh noted in a later manifesto, “*zaum* is a universal art, though its origin and initial character may be national. For example hurrah, euhoe, and so on. Transrational works may result in a worldwide poetic language which is born

⁵⁰ Cited in Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History*, 131. Additional reference to this work will be cited as *RF*. Marjorie Perloff also provides valuable commentary on this manifesto and on the Russian futurists in general in Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, 116–61.

⁵¹ *RF* 131. The numbering of the list in this manifesto is deliberately out of sequence, so these items, labeled the third and first, actually follow points four, five, and two.

organically, and not artificially like Esperanto” (*RF* 346).⁵² Kruchenykh’s presentation of *zaum* as its own language suggests that the poetic act is akin to an operation of translation not entirely dissimilar to Riding’s method discussed above. Both are subtractive operations.⁵³ The Russian futurists, however, sacrifice common referential meaning to get at a universal language of sonic incantation, while Riding’s process goes in the opposite direction, sacrificing sound and other features commonly associated with poetry to achieve her restrained, literal account. Both procedures invoke a kind of universal language, but their ideas of what this language should look like could not be more opposed. Far from attempting a kind of writing that is “beyondsense,” Riding ultimately wished to secure a “rational meaning”: a rigorous use of language in which each word has one and only one meaning.⁵⁴

The vast difference in the aims that Riding and the futurists have in deploying their similar, and undeniably avant-garde formalist compositional procedures complicates the too-easy reduction of form to an author’s poetics *tout court*. As we saw in the difficulties of reading “The Dry Heart,” Riding’s formal practices and compositional procedures (and by extension, those of the futurists) are better described

⁵² As Markov notes, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh developed divergent accounts of what *zaum* poetry should be, but they shared the commitment to foregrounding sound and the ambition of universality for the new poetic idiom. (*RF* 347).

⁵³ Despite this methodological similarity, I would not include the Russian futurist works in the category of the prosed poem. I will argue in the conclusion that a number of terms may be needed to describe the wide variety of negative forms.

⁵⁴ Here again, Jennifer Ashton’s account of Riding’s career is helpful in clarifying what is at stake. Ashton’s radical reinterpretation of Riding’s poetic career is to present her later one-word, one-meaning view of language as the logical outcome of, and entirely consistent with, her previous poetic practices (despite her absolute rejection of those works). Just as I am proposing that Riding and the Futurists were using similar compositional procedures for contradictory aims, Ashton carefully distinguishes many aspects of Riding’s work—the function of naming, the epistolary form—from similar practices in Gertrude Stein. See Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 89–118.

as local, tactical effects that can be used in service of either open or closed works, depending on the way the author(s) frame those formal choices.

A given formal procedure, whether it be writing toward the rationality of prose or toward the universality of pure sound, cannot be inherently rational or universal. Rather to use these forms is a kind of positing, a poetic argument, whose success or failure ultimately must be judged on rhetorical grounds. Riding herself acknowledges this when she deems her attempts a failure and renounces poetry as an activity that might settle formal and referential questions of this kind. In *The Life of the Dead*, the failure of this prosaic gambit is precisely what Riding lamented (and ultimately led her to renounce poetry) and what her latter-day admirers among the Language poets celebrate. The fact the Language poets were drawn both to Riding and to the Russian futurists may have something to do with what is shared in their disparate poetics: a commitment to a kind of negative, subtractive form. Riding's restraint, as I have argued, was aimed at canceling out the phenomenal features of language to produce a closed, determinate, and literal text. The futurists practiced their own kind of formal restraint: they sought to cancel out rational, determinate meaning to produce an open text of pure sensory phenomena: the visual "moods" of handwriting and the universality of pure sound.

Conclusions: Ashbery's *Three Poems*

Like the Russian futurist works, John Ashbery's *Three Poems* can be seen as an inversion of the claims Riding makes for her poems in the *The Life of the Dead*. Instead of presenting a "poetic prose" formatted in verse, Ashbery presents a text, formatted almost entirely as prose, but gives it the title of "Three Poems." And as we

saw in the wide divergence of aims and results issuing from similar methodological or compositional principles in Riding and the futurists, Ashbery's "prose" only begins to describe what is happening formally and compositionally in this work. We will see that Ashbery's restrained prose, less playful and less disjunctive than much of his verse poetry, bears a striking resemblance to Riding's translativ procedure in *The Life of the Dead*, though he employs that procedure to serve different aims. Both Riding and Ashbery turn to the concept of "prose" to develop their poetic arguments. As John Shoptaw has noted, *Three Poems* passes through several distinct arrangements of its prose language:

Three Poems consists of two fifty-page poems and a ten-page resumption.

Each poem differs minimally and significantly in format: "The New Spirit" is made up of "prose blocks" (unindented prose stanzas) and unindented verse, "The System" of prose blocks, and "The Recital" of regularly indented paragraphs.⁵⁵

These slight changes in formatting could easily go unnoticed, but the general trend is toward conventionally formatted, indented prose paragraphs. "The New Spirit" opens fitfully with a mixture of verse and prose and plenty of white space:

I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the
thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.

clean-washed sea

The flowers were.

⁵⁵ John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 134. See also Steven Monte, *Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French and American Literature* (Lincoln: Nebraska Univ. Press, 2000), 196–202.

These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself. It is you who made this, therefore you are true. But the truth has passed on to divide all.⁵⁶

The opposition between “put[ting] it all down” and “leaving all out”—the problem of selectivity—is one of the major thematic threads of the poem, as many critics have noted. Most follow Stephen Fredman in seeing a desire to present, in the words of Ashbery’s description of Stein, an “endless process of elaboration” aimed at mimicking not just events, but their “way of happening.”⁵⁷ Ashbery, following Stein, “attempt[s] to present unmediated experience...to reach the impossible goal of total mimesis.”⁵⁸ The result is a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion that Fredman describes as a “necessarily inaccurate transcription...a secondary operation rather than a primary composition, something like a translation instead of an original presentation.”⁵⁹

Ashbery’s meditative prose, like Stein’s *Stanzas*, includes not just complex ideas and experiences but the fits and starts of language that often accompany the attempt to express those things. The side of exclusion, the “leaving out,” is presented in these opening lines as both a choice (as in the exemplary fragments he readily produces) and a problem of memory: “forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their

⁵⁶ John Ashbery, *Three Poems* (New York: Viking, 1972), 3. Hereafter, *TP*.

⁵⁷ Stephen Fredman, *Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1990) 101–2. For Ashbery’s review of Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, see “The Impossible: Gertrude Stein” in John Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, Eugene Richie, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004): 11–14.

⁵⁸ Fredman, *Poet’s Prose*, 103.

⁵⁹ Fredman, *Poet’s Prose*, 105. The phrase “necessarily inaccurate transcription” is drawn from Ashbery’s “Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop.” See Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 168.

place.” The problem of inclusion and exclusion, then, is largely about content: what experiences should be included in order to present life’s “way of happening.”

What often goes unremarked, however, is that Ashbery is also making choices on the level of form. The verse fragments “clean-washed sea / The flowers were” are given as “examples of leaving out,” but Ashbery’s formal choices are also examples of leaving things out. To write these poems in prose, Ashbery chooses to leave out the visual and auditory effects of versification such as lineation, alliteration, and other kinds of verbal or visual patterning. The opening pages of “The New Spirit” contain several passages in verse, and the prose blocks themselves are frequently enjambed as if they were verse paragraphs. Steven Monte notes that these verse features eventually drop out in the first poem, and do not reappear in the two later poems:

The poem’s formal changes can be linked to some thematic development. The interrupted passages and the quick succession of prose and verse in the first half of “The New Spirit” suggest that Ashbery, in the fiction of the poem if not literally, is working out how to write the long poem in prose he is writing: the mimesis of life’s way of happening is also a representation of the poem’s way of happening.⁶⁰

Monte’s hypothesis here is that the poem’s formal arrangement is of a piece with the larger mimetic aims of the book. If he is correct, then the argumentative arc of *Three Poems* comes into view more clearly by following this thread—the gradual movement toward “prose” in parallel with the “impossible goal of total mimesis”—than by following any single thematic thread in the poems. But just as in the thematic elements

⁶⁰ Monte, *Invisible Fences*, 202.

of the poem, there are forks in the road: even if *Three Poems*' formal changes seem to be going in the same general direction, they do not end up at any single destination. Surveying these formal changes over the course of the entire volume, Monte concludes: "The poem's allegories of meaning and confusion....are furthermore played out on a formal level...[b]ut instead of confirming oppositions between the poetic and the prosaic, *Three Poems* ultimately suggests that prose has as many conventions and constraints as poetry."⁶¹ This conclusion mirrors the development of so many other argumentative threads in the poem: once Ashbery introduces a simple opposition (e.g., "putting it all in" vs. "leaving all out") only to have each side of the opposition splinter into its own internal divisions.⁶² Neither side, in the end, is a stable position from which to follow an argument.

The way in which the prose formatting of *Three Poems* gives rise to a structure of opposition that animates the work recalls the productive tension we found in the reading of "The Dry Heart" from *The Life of the Dead*. In a 1971 interview, Ashbery's comments on the prose of *Three Poems* reveal further affinities between his work and Riding's restrained "poetic prose": "There's something very self-consciously poetic about French prose poetry which I wanted to avoid and which I guess is what I found disappointing in my earlier prose poems; it's very difficult to avoid a posture, a certain

⁶¹ Monte, *Invisible Fences*, 217.

⁶² Other oppositions in *Three Poems* that seem to me to follow this logic are: the Tower of Babel vs. the image of the constellation at the end of "The New Spirit" (50–51); the "twin notions of growth" (69–71) and the "two kinds of happiness" (71–80) in "The System"; and the second-order "problem" ("the problem is that there is no new problem" that runs throughout "The Recital."

rhetorical tone.”⁶³ Ashbery’s poetics of avoidance, and his identification of a certain poetic excess in French poetry, emphatically recalls Riding’s description of her compositional method in the “Explanation” to *The Life of the Dead*.

Stephen Fredman’s reading of *Three Poems* suggests additional parallels between *Three Poems* and *The Life of the Dead*. We noted above that Fredman characterizes Ashbery’s work as “something like a translation instead of an original presentation.” Fredman develops this observation by appealing to Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator.” Citing Benjamin’s distinction between the activity of the poet (“spontaneous, primary, graphic”) and that of the translator (“derivative, ultimate, ideational”), Fredman asserts that “John Ashbery, as a poet, leans heavily toward the translative half of Benjamin’s distinction, especially in the prose of *Three Poems*” (Fredman, *Poet’s Prose* 106). “Given [Benjamin’s] definition of translation,” Fredman continues, “it is not difficult to see John Ashbery as a necessarily inaccurate transcriber of pure language in *Three Poems*” (107). This comparison frames Fredman’s entire discussion of the book, and he refers to Ashbery’s form throughout the chapter as a “translative prose.” Fredman’s appeal to “pure language” in his Benjaminian reading of Ashbery recalls McGann’s interpretation of *The Life of the Dead* as a radically open work. While McGann’s reading went decidedly against the grain of Riding’s conservative view of authorial intention, Ashbery is much more

⁶³ This comment is quoted in nearly every major study of this poem. See Fredman, *Poet’s Prose*, 130, Monte, *Invisible Fences*, 134, and Magueritte Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 192.

amenable to the idea of an “open text.”⁶⁴ In “The System,” Ashbery explicitly thematizes the reader’s involvement in the creation of meaning in *Three Poems*. Where Riding’s rigid determinism places nearly impossible demands on the reader, Ashbery leaves room for a reader who grows sleepy and inattentive:

The unsatisfactoriness, the frowns and squinting, the itching and scratching as you listen without taking in what is being said to you, or only in part, so that you cannot piece the argument together, should not be dismissed as signs of our chronic all-too-human weakness but welcomed and examined as signs of life in which part of the whole truth lies buried. And as the discourse continues and you think you are not getting anything out of it, as you yawn and rub your eyes and pick your nose or scratch your head, or nudge your neighbor on the hard wooden bench, this knowledge is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress itself on you, the forms of your inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand. [...] [A] change has begun to operate in you, within your very fibers and sinews. (TP 79–80).

In this paratactic catalog of his readers’ bodily reactions to the challenges of remaining attentive to the argument, Ashbery seems to go out of his way to include as many kinds of inattention and readerly fatigue as possible. Ashbery departs definitely from

⁶⁴ It is worth noting that Ashbery, in his lecture on Riding, insists on the necessity of *misreading* her sharply limited view of her own poetry:

What then are we to do with a body of poetry whose author warns us that we have very little chance of understanding it, and who believes that poetry itself is a lie? Why, misread it, of course, if it seems to merit reading, as hers so obviously does. This is what happens to any poetry: no poem can ever hope to produce the exact sensation in even one reader that the poet intended; all poetry is written with this understanding on the part of poet and reader; if it can’t stand the test of what Harold Bloom names “misprision,” then we leave it to pass on to something else. Fortunately, Riding’s poetry does pass the test, even though this is the last thing she would have wanted. (Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 101–2)

Riding's ideal of determinate meaning at precisely this point, coming down squarely on the side of the open text whose meaning is subject to vicissitudes of the reader's interpretive energies.⁶⁵ Rather than chastising the reader, Ashbery here authorizes the reader's frustration in much the same way as he describes reading Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*: "Like people, Miss Stein's lines are comforting or annoying or brilliant or tedious. Like people they sometimes make no sense and sometimes make perfect sense or they stop short in the middle of a sentence and wander away [...] the story of *Stanzas in Meditation* is a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars."⁶⁶ Our lack of understanding, it turns out, is built into "The System": "this knowledge...take[s]...the forms of your inattention." Ashbery's assurance that "a change has begun to operate within you, within your very fibers and sinews" echoes Whitman's optimism at the end of "Song of Myself": "You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, / But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, / And filter and fibre your blood."

These passages establish *Three Poems* as an open text for another, subtler reason than the simple fact that they thematize the contingencies of readerly attention. Along with the gesture of excusing the reader's mental inattentiveness, Ashbery introduces a bodily basis of understanding that might otherwise have been excluded by his choice of prose in *Three Poems*. Even though *Three Poems* does not offer the lush sonic landscape of his verse poems, Ashbery suggests that a direct, bodily connection

⁶⁵ This passage is only one of several in "The System" that thematize the reader's flagging attention. Compare the passage beginning "At this point a drowsiness overtakes you as of total fatigue and indifference" (84–85), and the reader's frustrating encounter with "a fork in the road" (90–91).

⁶⁶ Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 12.

to the poem can be made through the reader's yawns, squints, scratches, and nose-picking. By leaving this small opening for a direct, sensual connection to the poem, Ashbery opens his text up to the non-rational aspects of poetic language that Riding studiously avoids. Nevertheless, their compositional procedures are strikingly similar: the translative aspect, the concept of prose that is internally divided, and the avoidance of perceived excesses of poetic language. Both works explore the resources of prose through the careful negation of form, revealing their relation to a genre—the prosed poem—that is defined by resisting resonance and subtracting sensuality.

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The initial stumbling block in engaging each of these texts was its generic mislabeling: Riding's prose is formatted as verse, and Ashbery's 118-page prose discourse is labeled *Three Poems*. The fact that, in modern literature, so many works on both sides of the verse/prose divide can be accurately mislabeled in this way has led many scholars to propose a middle, or "third term" between verse and prose. Northrop Frye, for instance, distinguishes between a conception of prose as "not ordinary speech, but ordinary speech on its best behavior, in its Sunday clothes" and another kind of prose that attempts to reflect the rhythms of ordinary speech in a written context, which he calls "associative rhythm" (because such writing often follows the logic of "private" associations rather than public standards of reasoning and address to a pre-established, conventional audience).⁶⁷ In poetics, the former sense of "prose" seems to reflect what Robert Pinsky called "discursive" writing, whereas the latter points to that elusive

⁶⁷ Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963), 18–22.

third term, between verse and prose, which Marjorie Perloff has called “free prose” or, following Frye, “associative monologue.”⁶⁸

I argue that, while “free prose” certainly has an important literary history, which Perloff does a remarkable job of sketching out in her brief article (from Christopher Smart to Joyce, Beckett, Williams, and Ashbery), this literary history cannot be separated from the surrounding confusion concerning the nature of “prose” itself.⁶⁹ Throughout the critical literature on prose poetry and related texts, a host of third terms have been proposed to fill in the gaps: Stephen Fredman offers the title of his book, “poet’s prose,” as a category of prose writings by poets that would contain more than just the prose poem, and would also help to describe a *sui generis* American strain of writings distinct from the French tradition of the *poème en prose*. David Antin’s “talk poems,” Michael Davidson’s “prose of fact,” and Ron Silliman’s sentence-writing also name important trends in poetic writing that seriously engages with the concept of prose. None of these terms, however, provides the silver bullet that would describe the rich and varied field of poetic writing at the margins of verse and prose. Consequently, I see the critical search for third terms such as “free prose” as a *result* of this significant poetic activity, not its resolution or sublation.

Likewise, the description of the prose poem as a “hybrid genre” or an example of “postgeneric” writing becomes less compelling in light of the variety of these

⁶⁸ Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978). Marjorie Perloff, “Between Verse and Prose: Beckett and the New Poetry,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982): 415–33.

⁶⁹ Perloff’s pedagogical point in this essay is, of course, well taken: such similar works as Beckett’s prose, Ashbery’s *Three Poems*, and the contemporary writing that takes its cues from both should not be artificially separated by canons and curricula that rigidly classify prose with prose and verse with verse.

formal practices. Ashbery's expansive meditations in *Three Poems*, much longer than traditional notions of the prose poem but not any closer to longer-format genres like the poetic novel, illustrate this point quite clearly. Monte notes that "from the perspective of today, *Three Poems* frames itself more as an Ashbery long poem than as a prose poem or prose-poem sequence."⁷⁰ Fredman similarly writes that "*Three Poems* unites the two extreme forms of American poetry, the long poem and poet's prose."⁷¹ These comments suggest that the sheer length of the texts in *Three Poems* is at least as important a formal feature as the fact that they are formatted as prose, and the problem of length in the poem is at least in part a result of the dissonance between those two genres. But if we already conceive of the prose poem as a "hybrid" genre, then to describe *Three Poems* we would have to call it a hybrid of a hybrid, considerably reducing the explanatory power of generic hybridity. It is better, I think, to encourage a proliferation of terms for the kinds of texts that happen in the grey areas between poetry and prose.

My term, the prosed poem, is only one among many, but it is meant to highlight the way in which these works employ a poetics of restraint, a kind of negative form. As poetic works begin to interact with the concept of prose, they leave the terrain of positive formal constraints—lineation, rhyme, meter—that appear phenomenally on the page or in the ear. Most of our thinking about poetic form is attuned to this positive side of the spectrum. Negative forms such as the restraint practiced by Riding or by Ashbery are more difficult to perceive phenomenally, but

⁷⁰ Monte, *Invisible Fences*, 188.

⁷¹ Fredman, *Poet's Prose*, 114.

they are formal and generic practices nonetheless. Ashbery, in *Three Poems*, toys with narrative structures, but rejects their coherence; he also toys with lyric structures, but rejects their resonance as well. *Three Poems* is not a lyrical narrative, it is a non-narrative non-lyric. Its form is subtractive, and only comes into view in the way it studiously avoids these positive formal impulses.

The omnipresent claim that modern poetry gravitates toward the condition of prose should be the beginning of a discussion about poetic form, genre, and prosody, not an end. Prose, especially in the hands of writers like Ashbery and Riding, is anything but a neutral, plain, or straightforward medium. Even in a work like *The Life of the Dead*, which aims at a kind of determinate neutrality of prose, the procedural paces that Riding put her prose through were hardly straightforward, and for many of her readers the result is anything but the closed, determinate text she wished to produce. Instead, as Steven Monte suggests of *Three Poems*, “ultimately...prose has as many conventions and constraints as poetry,” and as such prose (or any of the other terms we have considered) may not be able to offer any more stability to Riding than poetry had offered. Far from lessening the importance of form, however, this view suggests that we pay closer attention to how writers deploy their tactical formal choices, even in their basic assumptions about verse and prose, to pursue larger strategic aims in relating language to world.

CHAPTER 2

William Carlos Williams and the Poetics of Pace

"Is what I have written prose?"
—Williams, *Spring and All*

I: A Difference in Kind

William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* is a work of twenty-seven poems, interspersed with prose passages, written in 1922, around the time Williams was also working on *The Great American Novel*.¹ Williams referred to *Spring and All* as having the same form as the *Improvisations (Kora in Hell)*, by which he means alternating between poetic texts (or prose improvisations in the case of *Kora*) and prose commentary or other expository material—a genre known as *prosimetrum*. Where *Kora* alternated between Williams's "improvisations" in roman type followed after a dividing line by his "interpretations" in italic, *Spring and All* would take on the more traditional format of prosimetrum: verse poems interspersed with prose texts. Though he did not use the term prosimetrum, Williams would trace the format back to a book lent to him by Pound, a 1795 edition of Metastasio's *Varie Poesie*.² The form has a history that reaches still earlier; it is the genre of Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy* and Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Convivio*. In the case of the *Vita Nuova*, especially, the prose explanations or narratives are used to weave together a sequence

¹ A twenty-eighth poem, "The Hermaphroditic Telephones," would be inserted as the penultimate poem for the verse-only sequences Williams approved for his *Complete Collected Poems* (1938) and *Collected Early Poems* (1951), although he had imagined it as part of the sequence as early as *Go-Go* (1923), a pamphlet which contained ten poems from the *Spring and All* project published in Monroe Wheeler's Mannikin series and which predates the publication of *Spring and All* proper.

² William Carlos Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, ed. Edith Heal (New York: New Directions, 1958), 36–38.

of previously unrelated poems, composed over a period of ten years, under a single purpose—a retrospective account of the poet’s love for Beatrice. Much more than mere glosses, the prose narrative and explanatory “divisions” enlist the poems—one is tempted to say *conscript* them—in the unifying project of poetic autobiography, often through quite willful acts of re-framing and recontextualizing from the perspective of the “new life” that was nowhere in the poet’s mind when the original lyrics were first composed and circulated.³ And yet, Dante’s poetic “I” is never singular, but always a divided self: a subject and an object, the past I of the lyrics and the present I of reflection and explication, poet and (self-)critic. This inescapably divided poetic self forms the basis of the “double voice” so important to the staging of the poet in the *Commedia* as both a pilgrim-character with a limited perspective and an omniscient poet-composer who fully knows the details of the entire journey and its allegorical significance.

Dante’s double voice is mirrored by Williams’s reflections that the prose of *Spring and All* was the product of his “disturbed mind” while the poems “were kept pure,” suggesting a second voice that could encompass and transcend the prose-speaker’s disturbed state.⁴ While it is unknown to what extent Williams had these problems explicitly in mind when working on *Kora in Hell* or *Spring and All*—and even his 1950s recollections about Metastasio may not be entirely trustworthy—it is

³ A lucid account of these and other issues in *La Vita Nuova* can be found in Jerome Mazzaro, *The Figure of Dante: An Essay on the “Vita Nuova”* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981). Mazzaro was also a Williams scholar, and he notes suggestively in the preface that the book on Dante can be read, retrospectively, as a prologue to two of his earlier books: *Transformations in the Renaissance English Lyric* (Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1970) and *Williams Carlos Williams: The Later Poems* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973).

⁴ Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, 37.

quite clear that he meant for the “interpretations” in *Kora* to lend some shape and coherence to the disjointed “improvisations,” while also parodying the conventions of interpretative prose. (The idea that the poems say something deeper than what the prose glosses can reach or uncover is already present in the *Vita Nuova*). The prosimetric format, in part, is Williams’s answer to the explosion of paratextual manifestos, sham narratives, faux-scholarly annotations, and the like among his European and expatriate counterparts. For all their playfulness, the prose frame texts address a real, practical problem that is not so far from Dante’s: how to organize a series of writings, composed over a long period of time and for disparate occasions, into a single work. Likewise, among the deliberate nonsense of some of these passages, Williams includes statements about poetry and the role of the poet that he would return to again and again.

Having grown tired of subsidizing his own publications, Williams sought to have the book published by William Bird—jokingly referred to as *L’Oiseau* in Williams’s correspondence—whose Three Mountains Press editions were being selected by Pound. This fizzled, and the book was ultimately published in Dijon by William McAlmon—Bryher’s beard⁵—with whom Williams had already been collaborating on the journal *Contact*. *Spring and All* was published by McAlmon’s Contact Press in the fall of 1923, in an edition of 300, but saw virtually no distribution

⁵ According to Mariani, he funded his printing activities with an allowance from Bryher, one of the terms of agreement for their (sham) marriage (209). McAlmon would publish Stein’s *The Making of Americans* in 1925.

even in the bookshops of Paris.⁶ Ten of the poems had appeared in the U.S. that spring as *Go-Go*, and all of the poems would later be printed, without the prose, in subsequent collections of Williams's work. The integral work would not be republished until 1970, in the *Imaginations* volume with *New Directions*. Its influence and centrality to Williams's poetics stems less from the impact it had on the poetry world, which was quite small, than from the fact that Williams repeatedly returned to it, with *Kora*, as a touchstone of his thinking about poetry. Chief among the touchstone passages is the series of reflections during the prose portions of the final ten to fifteen pages of *Spring and All* concerning the difference between poetry and prose. As we will see, these passages treat poetry as a process of the Imagination—an entirely different mode of thinking than prose—and the distinctions he has in mind are much larger than technical questions about format, lineation, enjambment, and so forth.

Williams insists that the distinction between verse and prose is a difference in kind, not degree. In one of the most forceful arguments for this position, Williams discounts the two major features that distinguish verse and prose—its appearance to the eye and to the ear, vision and resonance—because these features seem to invite comparisons of degree: for example, that a prose passage would at some point turn into verse if it were made to be more and more rhythmical or metrically regular. Against such notions of a sliding scale between verse and prose, Williams proposes a difference in their respective nature, intention, purpose, origin, and even being. Such

⁶ This publication history is recounted in Paul Mariani, *Williams Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 199–209.

categorical distinctions leave no room for third terms such as free prose, lyrical prose, or associative rhythm. Interestingly, though, the genre of the prose poem would seem to survive Williams's distinction, since eye and ear are not, ultimately, deciding factors. Rather, the qualitative factors that make something a "poem" would trump its formal status as prose. It had been a commonplace of discussion of free verse to argue that rhythm was present in free verse, indeed a defining feature of it, but in a *less pronounced* way than in regularly metrical verse, and that part of the freedom of free verse was precisely in its ability to modulate rhythms to be felt as more or less prominent. Williams opens his discussion of verse and prose by rejecting this criterion:

The nature of the difference between what is termed prose on the one hand and verse on the other is not to be discovered by a study of the metrical characteristics of the words as they occur in juxtaposition. It is ridiculous to say that verse grades off into prose as the rhythm becomes less and less pronounced, in fact, that verse differs from prose in that the meter is more pronounced, that the movement is more impassioned and that rhythmical prose, so called, occupies a middle place between prose and verse.

[...]

Of course there is nothing to do but to differentiate prose from verse by the only effective means at hand, the external, surface appearance. But a counter proposal may be made, to wit: that verse is of such a nature that it may appear

without metrical stress of any sort and that prose may be strongly stressed—in short that meter has nothing to do with the question whatever. (229)⁷

Williams is at pains in the opening of his discussion to make concessions to certain commonsense notions about the distinction between verse and prose. But his theory of the imagination is premised, uneasily, on equally weighted appeals both to the “surface appearance” of an artwork and its “nature.” Verse is “of such a nature” that it can override any definitional constraints suggested by its surface effects. What the thing *is* (verse or prose) constrains its features, not the other way around. Truly imaginative works enact a difference in kind that distinguishes them from what Williams refers to as “stale” works, a categorical distinction between static facts and dynamic energies. As Williams writes, in a series of prose passages appearing to begin and end mid-sentence:

or better: prose has to do with the fact of an emotion; poetry has to do with the dynamization of emotion into separate form. This is the force of the imagination.

prose: statement of facts concerning emotions, intellectual states, data of all sorts—technical expositions, jargon, of all sorts—fictional and other—

⁷ Here and throughout I cite to the text given in William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I: 1909–1939*, A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, eds. (New York: New Directions, 1986). Further references to this edition appear in-line. The text of *Spring and All* runs from 187–236, with important textual notes at 500–505. Though I have not chosen it as my copy text, a facsimile of the Contact Press edition has recently been published by New Directions: William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (Paris: Contact: 1923; reprint, New York: New Directions, 2011).

poetry: new form dealt with as a reality in itself.

The form of prose is the accuracy of its subject matter—how best to expose the multiform phases of its material

the form of poetry is related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words—or whatever it may be—

the cleavage is complete

(219)

Prose maps on to representation and factual exposition, and Williams does not discount its usefulness in this respect. But poetry, imagination, and art map on to the presentation of new realities. In the well-known formulation that appears earlier in *Spring and All*: “not realism, but reality itself . . . not a matter of ‘representation’ . . . but of separate existence” (204). But a second prong of Williams’s description of imaginative works appeals to their object-hood, not their ideal nature. To the extent that the imagination *does* create these new objects with independent existence in the world, they turn out to be discoverable by the senses and recognized by their “external, surface appearance.” Successful works of art would achieve independent existence, and wouldn’t need to rely on a tether to the imaginative consciousness that created them. The attempt to distinguish verse from prose confronts this problem: Williams wants to acknowledge both the commonsense external appearance of the new work, as well as the qualitative difference in its nature, a movement from static

fact to dynamic value. It is the chief task of the imagination to accomplish this differentiation—"cleavage" is a preferred term in *Spring and All*—between dull fact and animated, imaginative reality.

The exaltation men feel before a work of art is the feeling of reality they draw from it. It sets them up, places a value upon experience—(said that half a dozen times already)

(215)

[P]oetry does not tamper with the world but moves it . . . it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—

(234–35)

Sometimes I speak of imagination as a force, an electricity or a medium, a place. It is immaterial which: for whether it is a condition of a place or a dynamization its effect is the same.

(235)

To the extent that Williams wishes to emphasize the imaginative "force" of poetry, he is willing to discount its outward appearance in favor of its inward nature. When it comes to distinguishing verse and prose, though, the appeal to the nature of verse, in which "meter has nothing to do with the question whatever," prompts a further cascade of concessions to commonsense objections that the difference should be easily perceptible:

Of course it may be said that if the difference is felt and is not discoverable to the eye and ear then what about it anyway? Or it may be argued, that since there is according to my proposal no discoverable difference between prose

and verse that in all probability none exists and that both are phases of the same thing. (230)

At this point Williams comes close to throwing his hands up in the air, and this difficulty in disentangling the two is what forces the shift to a discussion of separate origins:

Yet, quite plainly, there is a very marked difference between the two which may arise in the fact of a separate origin for each, each using similar modes for dis-similar purposes; verse falling most commonly into meter but not always, and prose going forward most often without meter but not always. (230)

Again, Williams's distinctions here only work if the kind of writing a particular composition *is* (verse or prose) can be determined in advance of its phenomenal features (for instance, meter or the lack thereof). In his terms, the purpose or origin determines the mode, and it is an error in logic to argue from rhythmic effect to its cause. By virtue of their purposes or origins, verse is already verse before it falls into meter, and prose already prose before it goes forward without meter. Part of the dissonance here stems from the suggestion that the source and ultimate arbiter of form lies outside of form itself: Williams's idea of form is based on anti-formalist premises.

At this point, Williams has several generations of scholars—since Wimsatt and Beardsley's "Intentional Fallacy" essay was published in 1946—scratching their heads. We seem to agree that such purposes are unknowable, or if they are knowable, that this is only through inference from the words on the page. It seems risky, even stupid, to base our readings on intentions, which are not available when the text is right in front of us, but to Williams this objection has it precisely backwards. The

argument in *Spring and All* suggests that it is much more important to determine at the outset whether something is stale and plagiaristic or truly imaginative, before one goes about trying to sort out the relevance, meaning, or potential impact of its rhythmic features (or lack thereof), its success as poetry. Perhaps he has a point. Perhaps it is more honest to say that readers do make these kinds of prejudgments about a text's demands on our attention before diving into a close reading or a scansion, and that these are, ultimately, based on ideas about the origin or purpose underlying the text.

It should not come as too much of a surprise, then, that in the final move of his argument, Williams lays down evaluative criteria for distinguishing which "origin" a given passage might have come from. This shift into value is timed exactly with a bit of terminological sleight of hand: having written up to this point of verse and prose, verse drops out and becomes "poetry" for the evaluative portion of the argument.

Continuing from the passages quoted above:

This at least serves to explain some of the best work I see today and explains some of the most noteworthy failures which I discover. I search for "something" in the writing which moves me in a certain way—It offers a suggestion as to why some work of Whitman's is bad poetry and some, in the same meter is prose.

The practical point would be to discover when a work is to be taken as coming from this source and when from that. When discovering a work it would be—If it is poetry it means this and only this—and if it is prose it means that and only that. Anything else is confusion, silly and bad practice. (230)

The explicitly evaluative dimension significantly ups the ante: not only must the reader determine whether something is poetic or prosaic at origin, she must also say whether it has come off successfully. Williams has Whitman's poetry failing in two ways: first, as bad poetry, and second, as failing to be poetry at all, remaining prose. This creates not two but four categories:

- good poetry (imaginative origin or purpose, and well-executed, irrespective of form);
- bad poetry (imaginative origin, but poorly executed);
- prose (in verse form, but non-imaginative in origin: a doubly failed attempt at poetry);
- prose (in prose, and non-prosaic in origin: the normal condition of prose).

Williams reiterates, in an attempt to reassure us, that "I believe it possible, even essential, that when poetry fails it does not become prose but bad poetry" (230). But this continues to assume that we can know whether something is poetry or not, before deciding whether or not it has failed. "Marianne Moore escapes" this double-failure even to be bad poetry, as he has told us earlier (188), but he can't quite say why: "Her work puzzles me. It is not easy to quote convincingly" (231). At the top of page 231, Williams attempts to re-start a thought that might shore things up, but breaks off unsuccessfully: "The practical point would be to discover—" (231). Falling silent in this way is a regular feature of the prose of *Spring and All* and, oddly, not at all present in the verse poems. Anapodoton, as the rhetorical figure can be termed, is a topic we will address later in the chapter, though the reader is invited to take note of its appearance in passages quoted above and below. As a species of classical rhetoric,

anapodoton (in which the grammar suggests an ending that is not supplied) is a sub-species of anacoluthon (the larger category for grammatical interruptions). Falling silent typically suggests either that the speaker is overcome with emotion, or that what ought to follow is, in fact, ineffable. Williams pairs this ineffability with the weirdly efficient strategy of simply cutting his syntactical losses upon reaching an impasse. Articulating the “practical point” that, if discovered, would allow us to reliably predict when some piece of writing is verse (or poetry) and when prose, seems to be such an impasse.⁸ The abrupt shift to evaluation would seem to confirm as much, and in fact, Williams explains his use of anacoluthon in *Spring and All* just at the moment that he reflects on the status of the present work as verse or prose:

Is what I have written prose? The only answer is that form in prose ends with the end of that which is being communicated—If the power to go on falters in the middle of a sentence—that is the end of that sentence—Or if a new phase enters at that point it is only stupidity to go on. (226)

I find this position admirable and nearly unassailable. Sometimes the beginning of a thought alone is more suggestive than a hastily drawn or botched conclusion. Why not just abandon and move on? As often as not, riding up to the gate is sufficient, and it is only stupidity to go on unless one’s aims are more than simply communicative.

II: “Meter Has Nothing to Do With the Question Whatever”

Williams alternately gives up and muddles through, then, in distinguishing verse from prose in intrinsic and extrinsic terms, in descriptive and evaluative terms, and as cause

⁸ Modern readers may find this a dodge, but as argued earlier, Williams simply assumes that such evaluation is frontloaded in the reading encounter; there is no way to follow his argument, such as it is, without provisionally accepting the priority of deciding first whether something is poetry or prose.

and effect. So far, so good: in shifting the terms of the verse-prose distinction from intrinsic to extrinsic factors and from *is* to *ought*, Williams has plenty of distinguished company. Compared with those who diagnose a damaged modernity as essentially “prosaic,” and who insist poetry must become sober and prose-like in order to gain purchase on the modern condition, Williams’s insistence on aligning accurate presentation of reality with poetry and art (not prose or science) seems quaint, one of the reasons he is sometimes referred to as romantic in the pejorative sense. But the descriptive terms for his hard-nosed poetic reality align quite squarely with the terms in which others have called for poetry to become “prosaic.” Williams shares with these writers an insistence that style and world match—the position I have called isomorphism or synecdoche of word and world. They also share an approach to this matching in terms of reduction or subtraction. Williams’s anti-rhetorical stance is analogous to the poetic sobriety that seeks to disenchant the poetic, or bring the quixotic poetic project into line with a disenchanted world. Although the term prose remains on the pejorative side for Williams, it would become a new ideal of poetry for other strains of modernism.⁹ This helps to situate Williams among these larger trends

⁹ Or already had become a new ideal (at least on the continent) in the Russian, French, and Italian futurist contexts, as described by Marjorie Perloff in *The Futurist Moment*. Blaise Cendrars’s poem *La prose du transsibérien*, with illustrations by Sonia Delauney-Terk would seem to make a case in point. As visual art, the book is simply unsurpassed, with (smart) typographic innovation, and a continuous-sheet layout that is, quite literally, unbound. Delauney-Terk’s brilliant illustrations seem at once modern abstractions far ahead of their time and ancient illuminations continuous with a tradition running from manuscript culture to Blake. However, the text is underwhelming. The most salient feature—and one shared with other futurist works—is its rhetoric of speed and the aspiration to simultaneity. While Cendrars’s poet is on a train, Williams will take up this rhetoric of speed from his car while doing rounds in *Spring and All*. On speed and futurism, see Jeffrey Schnapp, ed. *Speed Limits* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2009).

in modernist poetry with some additional clarity—lending him new allies and sharpening distinctions with others.

But there is quite obviously a sense in which *Spring and All* is also a meditation on the “practical points” of difference between verse and prose, irrespective of the weight he assigns to capital-P poetry and sweeping gestures toward novelty. From a practical standpoint, the format of each page reflects Williams’s thinking about what counts as verse and what counts as prose. Williams tells us that “meter has nothing to do with the question whatever” (229), but this does not abolish the question of prosody in *Spring and All* entirely. If anything, it invites us to ask what meter or rhythm is doing *instead of* shoring up the distinction between verse and prose. Freed from the perpetual role of signposting “poetry here!,” what *does* rhythm do in this work?

The chief effect of the rhythmic differences between verse and prose (and of differences within these categories) is to regulate the reader’s sense of time in the work: speed, stasis, a fleeting glance, a frozen still life. While Williams’s relation to meter is clearly vexed, *Spring and All* is a work preoccupied with questions of time: historic time, repetition (good and bad), the problem of novelty, moving beyond the imagist instant, worries about hurried compositions, poetic observations made from a speeding car, and so on. Formally, Williams regulates the pace of our reading and our attention by switching between verse and prose and, within these modes, by various strategies of spacing, enjambment, and enjambment-like breaks in continuity (e.g., anacoluthon). Answering the question of what rhythm does in *Spring and All* and how it might relate to these other temporal effects will have two prongs: first, a look into

Williams's prosody and prosodic theories of the time, since many ideas current then have little currency today (e.g., isochrony). This first question is primarily historical. The second prong, more phenomenological than historical, will be to propose a new category of rhythm—that of pace—that seeks to draw together a number of the temporal effects that Williams conjures in *Spring and All*. This second topic, pace, will occupy the latter half of this chapter.



The definitive account of Williams's prosody remains Stephen Cushman's *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure*,¹⁰ and the discussion that follows below builds upon his careful testing of Williams's prosodic statements against his actual poetic practice and, crucially, Cushman's embedding of each of these in the history of English prosody and poetic form. Cushman identifies "measure" as the central keyword to Williams's prosody, but notes that the poet's uses of the term can be incredibly confusing and often contradictory. While the "meanings of measure" are almost as numerous as Williams's uses of the term, Cushman sorts them into three distinct categories: 1) measure in the "pseudo-musical" sense of phrasing that became the basis of the enjambment-based prosody Williams would develop for free verse (i.e., a sense of *measure* that is neither quantitative nor accentual); 2) measure as a "visual prosody" built on line-length and typographic arrangements; and 3) measure as trope, the mythological dimension in which "measure" comes to encompass not just a technical problem in verse, or even the need for a new prosody, to account for a

¹⁰ Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure* (Yale Univ. Press, 1985).

messy, fragmentary modernity (“the world is not iambic”), but measure as the name for the fundamental problem of relating word to world. In Cushman’s phrase, “measurement does not merely imply comparison with a standard; rather, it signifies a competitive struggle between the mind and matter, the former measuring itself and its freedom against the latter” (138). Cushman’s approach to the different senses of “measure”—phrasal, visual, and figurative—has in some ways been a model for the present investigation of prose: prose as a style of writing in need of prosodic description (with the advent of the prose poem); prose as a visual format; and prose as a metaphor for modernity. In Cushman’s account of Williams’s “measure” it is easy to hear many of the concerns voiced in the Conclusion to this dissertation by the proponents of “sobriety” and the need to develop a writing style appropriate to the broken and fragmentary world of modernity.

The primary focus of Cushman’s study is on Williams’s verse poems—and quite reasonably so. But his approach treats the distinction between verse and prose as largely settled, or at least easier to settle than the task of figuring out how measure and rhythm work in Williams’s free verse in ways that can’t be accounted for with reference to stress-based prosody, quantitative or time-based theories of the poetic line, or to prior free-verse models such as Whitman. That is, Cushman is primarily interested in distinguishing Williams’s verse from other species of verse, leaving one or two stones still unturned when it comes to works of prosimetrum like *Spring and All*. Instead of assuming a self-evident distinction between verse and prose, *Spring and All* puts both formats in play, so that each actively shapes the other. What is still needed in the criticism is an account of prosimetrical works in which *part of what the*

verse does is to set itself off from prose, and *part of what the prose does* is to set itself off from verse. The distinction is not assumed; rather, it is performed—staged even—through the format. Given that so many of Williams’s statements about capital-P poetry in this work define it *against* a certain, often implicit idea of what prose is, it is worth affording some additional attention to how the prose in *Spring and All* functions, both as itself and in relation to the surrounding verse poems.

Intrachapter: Stressers v. Timers

In the latter portions of this chapter, I will argue that the chief function of alternating between verse and prose in *Spring and All* is to effect certain modulations of *pace*: the pace of reading (breezy or difficult); the pace of observation (fleeting or lingering); and the pace of other aspects of time that do not fall easily into the categories of prosody, with its focus on the arrangement of syllables. The modernist project of novelty, for instance, is a kind of pace for Williams: when he imagines the mass extermination of the human race, and then the entire recapitulation of history up to that point (a “perfect plagiarism” about which “only the imagination is undeceived”) the overwhelming impression is not the violence of this passage but its speed. Williams opens *Spring and All* by imagining the history of the world destroyed and recreated from instant to instant, but other passages seek to dwell in each instant in calm reflection.

Before continuing with an exploration of these aspects of time in *Spring and All*, it is worth reflecting at some length on why notions of pace and tempo have been largely avoided or marginalized by theories of English prosody. As anyone who has ever heard a nervous student’s warp-speed recitation can tell you: pace matters—the

actual, measurable pace at which we read things to ourselves and others. Yet talk about pace has been unpopular among prosodists. Histories of the debates over English prosody that took place in the twentieth century generally adopt the framework established by Wimsatt and Beardsley: stressers vs. timers.¹¹ But literary history is written by the victors, and it is quite clear that time-based theories of meter and rhythm have largely lost the day. Following Wimsatt and Beardsley, influential discussion of meter from Derek Attridge, Richard Cureton, Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle, Paul Fussell, Harvey Gross, Morris Halle and Samuel Keyser, John Hollander, Paul Kiparsky, Marina Tarlinskaja, George Wright and still others all proceed on the basis of stress rather than time-based accounts of rhythm.¹²

Stress makes sense. The development of English metrical theories from early twentieth century foot scansion to latter day metrics really does seem like progress. Scholars learned to stop worrying about feet and nomenclature, and could focus on stress contours as they occur in English. Applying a healthy amount of suspicion toward what poets had been saying about their meters (and substituting a linguistic understanding of how rhythm is perceived in the language), unworkable analogies to classical meters were finally put to rest.¹³ Scholars' ability to articulate what actually happens in poems of regular or semi-regular meters has vastly improved over the past sixty years or so. The concept of relative stress represented a huge step forward from

¹¹ William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Concept of Meter: An Exercise in Abstraction," *PMLA* 74 (1959): 585–98.

¹² See the bibliography under these names for full references. The list is not exhaustive, but is nevertheless meant to point to influential discussions of meter in English from the 1960s through the 2000s.

¹³ Though not without producing some excellent studies examining what those appeals to classical models meant and how they came about, chief among these being Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974).

foot substitution and vaguer notions of promotion. But the chief innovation of stress-based theories has been to link metrical emphasis to meaning, not just to technical proficiency or musicality. This is the argument that has taken hold, and to which the so-called timers have had no response. Hollander's "metrical contract" and the idea of measuring rhythms not just internal to the lines but against readerly expectations based on genre and other conventions was a major advance: it proved that meter has a built-in historicism, against the claims which continue today that it is an abstract or technical property of language. Meter is a matter of nature and nurture. Even better, stress was shown to follow not just linguistic accent, but informational importance: stress makes sense. Even many free verse lines can be fruitfully described in terms of stress—not just Eliot's ghost of meter, but also Bishop's three-beat line and other species of accent—and those emphases too seem *meaningful* to an interpretation of the poem. The concept of "stress maximum" that originated in generative metrics has even led to theories of phrasal rhythm—in groupings beyond the level of the syllable—and these too have followed a stress model, where informational importance aligns with *strong* vs. *weak*.¹⁴

But things weren't so clear to poets and readers in the 1910s and 1920s, so here our discussion takes a short detour into defeated theories of "quantitative" meter. Sidney Lanier's *The Science of English Verse* (1880), with its scansion in the form of

¹⁴ See especially Richard D. Cureton, *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse* (New York: Longman, 1992). Others have outlined phrasal theories where the stress maximum of a line becomes a unit—weak or strong—at a higher level of organization. If I am reading him correctly, Cureton develops his stress-based phrasal theory from recent linguistics-based theories of phrasing in musicology (Jackendoff and Lerdahl [not consulted by me]), so it appears even music theory has abandoned quantity for a stress paradigm.

musical notation (the hallmark of quantitative approaches), remained highly influential; his approach was adopted by Harriet Monroe who, as founder and editor of *Poetry* from 1912 to 1936, was among the most influential figures in American poetry during that period.¹⁵ George Saintsbury's work—which advocates dodging the question of accent vs. quantity, since stress is likely to be a matter of accent, time, and a number of other things besides—had yet to take hold as the founding text of modern English prosody.¹⁶ In 1918, Amy Lowell published an essay in *The Dial* outlining her collaboration with Dr. William Morrison Patterson on a quantitative theory of free verse, developed with the aid of precise measurements taken from sound recordings of

¹⁵ This history is drawn from the one presented in Charles Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1980), 29–44, and from sources cited in his notes. For Monroe, see Harriet Monroe, “Rhythms of English Verse,” *Poetry* 3, no 2 (Nov. 1913): 61–68; continued in *Poetry* 3, no. 3 (Dec. 1913): 100–111. Full text issues of *Poetry* and other little magazines are available via the Modernist Journals Project: <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/index.html>. Further resources on quantity are to be found s.v. “quantity” in the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, in Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables*, and in the crucial first four chapters in John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975): 3–90. Many cite only the third chapter “Observations in the Art of English Quantity” but the entire “resonance” section of the book refers usefully to issues raised by quantity and musical notation. Hollander concurs with mainstream prosody in finding quantity simply unworkable in English, but is remarkable for his sensitivity to what poets were trying to do with their attempts to create analogues to the quantities of classical meters.

¹⁶ George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day*, vol. 1 (London: MacMillan, 1906), 5. The complexity of the actual scene of competing theories of English meter at the turn of the 20th century is dazzling and unassimilable (by me, at least). Meredith Martin has assembled an archive of thousands of treatises on meter and scansion between 1750–1950, known as the Princeton Prosody Archive (not yet available online). Her description of the project can be found in Meredith Martin, “Counting Victorian Prosodists: Productive Instability and Nineteenth Century Meter” *Victorians Institute Journal: VII Digital Annex* 38 (2010):

http://www.nines.org/exhibits/Counting_Victorian_Prosodists. While noting that the Princeton archive includes and extends beyond that of T.V.F. Brogan's 6,000 entries, she helpfully points to the existence of a searchable pdf version of his *English Versification, 1570–1980*:

<http://depts.washington.edu/versif/resources/evrg/>. It is perhaps also important to note that this version is hosted on the webpage for the now-defunct online journal *Versification* (active, 1997–99): <http://depts.washington.edu/versif/backissues/index.html>.

I confess that my sense for the genealogy and relative influence of 20th century studies of English prosody is one that has been passed down from teacher to student, rather than exhaustively verified through first-hand experience with the entire corpus represented in Martin's or Brogan's archives.

Lowell, an “expert reader” of *vers libre*.¹⁷ Today prosodists recognize this argument as a “performative fallacy,” a species of circular reasoning whereby it cannot be said whether one has generated performances to match the pre-existing rhythmical theory or, as one claims, developed the theory empirically on the basis of the recorded performances.¹⁸ The most common element of such theories is isochrony, the notion that the intervals between accents in a free verse poem are of equal duration, regardless of the varying syllable count.¹⁹ Despite being roundly criticized by Wimsatt and Beardsley, isochrony-based prosodic theories continued to emerge even after “The Concept of Meter,” cropping up among linguists in the 70s,²⁰ and also in the “breath prosody” of Olson and his followers.²¹ To some extent, the persistence of time-based

¹⁷ Amy Lowell, “The Rhythms of Free Verse,” *Dial* 64 (Jan. 17, 1918): 51–56. Lowell is responding to reviews of the second edition Patterson’s *Rhythm of Prose* (1917), where he reverses an earlier stance to acknowledge a difference between *vers libre* and prose as a result of his work with Lowell. Interestingly, Lowell quotes a subsequent paper by Patterson, delivered to the MLA in December of 1917, where he identifies “seven types” of writing along a spectrum from regular (metrical) verse over to (but not including) plain-Jane ordinary prose, including “mosaic” (6th) and “blended” (7th) types, which might be fruitfully be compared to prosimetrum (55).

¹⁸ Put another way, the performative fallacy treats the performances themselves as naïve, unbiased data points, whereas it seems more likely that expert performers such as Lowell already have some normative theory of rhythm that they are adhering to when reciting verse.

¹⁹ Some isochronists make the stronger claim that the lines in a free verse poem are equivalent in duration, regardless of syllable count, but the timing of stress-intervals is more comment. Lowell and Patterson measured the stress-intervals of her recitations to the tenth of a second (53). They were most interested in the recurrence of certain interval-lengths in a way that allow for variation by both poet and reader but nevertheless gathered around a central “cadence.” Prose, by contrast, proceeds in rhythmic intervals—even pronounced ones in the case of oratory—but uses a wide variety of interval-lengths, rather than clustering around a few, as they observed in free verse (54). Furthermore, Patterson anticipates Jakobson in arguing that free verse is distinguished from prose in *foregrounding* these rhythms: “The separate spacing of the phrases [in free verse as opposed to prose], whether printed or orally delivered, puts emphasis on the rhythmic balancing *as such*” (qtd. in Lowell, 53). Interestingly, Patterson also nods to visual format, suggesting that reader and hearer alike might miss the “sequence of balances” were the text “printed in solid blocks of prose” (qtd. in Lowell, 53).

²⁰ *New PEPP*, s.v. “quantity.”

²¹ Olson’s “Projective Verse,” developed quite consciously from Williams’s precedent, provides the clearest example of the circularity by which the manifesto dictates both the composition and the performance of the resulting poem, namely that each line occupy the length of a breath. Cushman sketches a mini-history of breath- and body-based prosodies, an analogy he names the “biological fallacy,” at 80–81. Later he submits a minor vogue for isochrony in Williams scholarship of the 70s and

theories of poetic rhythm is understandable. Despite the difficulties in getting good, unbiased empirical data, it is hard to deny the timers' logic: that rhythm occurs in time, and ought to be described and measured in units of time, not patterns of stress. Harriet Monroe states the matter clearly, first chastising Saintsbury for not taking sides—"as if one should preface a treatise in Astronomy with a refusal to decide whether the earth goes around the sun or the sun around the earth"—then linking poetic rhythms to those observed in science:

Since Sidney Lanier, musician and analyst as well as poet, wrote his *Science of English Verse*, there is no longer any excuse for persistence in the old error [of accent]. Rhythm is rhythm, and its laws are unchangeable, in poetry, in music, in the motion of tides and stars, in the vibration of sound-waves, light-waves, or the still more minute waves of molecular action. Always and everywhere rhythm is measured movement, a regular succession of time-intervals. English verse is as quantitative as Greek verse because its primary rhythms depend quite as essentially upon the time-values of its syllables, upon its marshalling of long and short syllables in feet of a given length; while its secondary rhythms, its phrase-movements, mark off with larger curves longer time-intervals. (61–62)²²

early 80s to a *reductio ad absurdum* at 81–84. Typically, isochronists appeal to the authority of precise measurements, but then backpedal to posit only rough equivalencies whereby, in Cushman's example, lines in Williams ranging from two to seventeen syllables occupy "more or less" the same amount of time, according to one isochronist account. The vagueness here seems unsatisfying given the bulkiness of the temporal apparatus. Below I argue for embracing vagueness.

²² In hindsight, Saintsbury's comfort with a model that allows for poetic rhythm to be accurately described sometimes accentually and sometimes quantitatively seems prescient, at least as far as the analogy to light-waves holds. Einstein's work on the particle-wave duality in the behavior of light is almost exactly contemporaneous with Saintsbury's work on prosody. Still, Saintsbury rejected

It seems so reasonable that poetic rhythm should be measurable in units of time like all other rhythms, but the scientism of timers tends to hedge in both directions: at once allowing for artistic variations in individual performances and appealing to those performances for “proof” of regularity. At some points, performances formed the precisely measured raw data from which they deduced temporal theories, while at others the rigidly equivalent time-intervals were abstracted onto the “score” of the page, which a reader could and should artfully vary in her interpretation. This circularity, however unscientific, has allowed for persuasive ways of talking about poetic rhythm. Today’s so-called performative fallacy formed the basis of Pound’s writing on rhythm at the time, to take yet another influential example. Pound’s 1918 essay “Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch” proposes a genealogy for free verse based on a distinction in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century musical theory between tempo (as recorded on musical notation) and cadence or movement (as performed by the virtuoso musician).²³ Free verse was the poetic analogue to the expressive irregularity of timekeeping in musical performance, as Pound makes clear via Dolmetsch quoting a 1717 treatise by François Couperin:

I find that we confuse Time, or Measure, with what is called Cadence or Movement. Measure defines the quantity and equality of beats; Cadence is properly the spirit, the soul that must be added. (439)

categorically the scientism of other theories of meter, preferring to maintain a historian’s objectivity: “To put the matter in yet another light, the subject of our enquiries will be Architecture, not Petrology; Painting, not the enquiry into the chemical constitution of colours; Art, not Science. But we shall find it possible and desirable, if not positively necessary, to include in our enquiries all important previous enquiries into the subject, because these constitute a very important part of the actual history thereof” (6). His open-mindedness was more Keatsian negative capability than Einsteinian particle-wave duality.

²³ T.S. Eliot, ed., *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 437–45.

This freedom was not confined to the small flourish of a *rubato* but extended to the entire work—“musical bars are a sort of scaffold to be kicked away when no longer needed”—and strict timekeeping was to be the exception rather than the rule: Couperin instructs performers to play his Preludes “in an easy manner, without binding themselves to strict time, unless I should have expressly marked it by the word *mesuré*” (439).

Williams was familiar with these arguments, and would turn to these resources in earnest when researching ways to justify and articulate the variable foot in the 1940s. It is a critical commonplace to compare the idiosyncrasy of Williams’s variable foot with that of Hopkins’s strong-stress theory of sprung rhythm, but Mariani notes that Williams actually preferred the quantitative theories of Hopkins’s confidant and editor, Robert Bridges.²⁴ Today, Bridges is the most frequently-referenced example of misguided experiments in the theory and practice of quantitative metrics in English verse. Quantitative experiments often go on display as a prosodic freak show—a monstrous attempt to cross-breed poetry from languages with incompatible quantity- and stress-based metrics, or worse, a private set of correspondences between two systems that only the poet can know unless he also provides a decoder ring. But are

²⁴ Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*, 545–48; 597–600. The less I venture about sprung rhythm the better. Suffice it to observe that since the 1980s a single poem, “The Windhover,” has emerged as a proving ground for all new theories of English meter. It is the prosodist’s siren song. A special issue of *Victorian Poetry* on Hopkins’s prosody, edited by Meredith Martin, appeared in summer 2011 (vol. 49.2), and was paired with an issue of *Hopkins Quarterly* 38 (Spring–Summer 2011), also on Hopkins’s prosody.

the follies of quantity really any more freakish than the early twentieth-century experimental typography, also a point of reference for *Spring and All*?²⁵

There must be *some* reason why readers of poetry have found quantity to be attractive, even though it has been proven again and again to be unworkable. What would it look like, today, to attempt a *rapprochement* with quantity as a way of thinking about Williams's prosody and his poetic practice in *Spring and All*? I do not wish to propose another explication of the "variable foot."²⁶ Perhaps the drive to derive a specific notion of "measure" by filling in the gaps left in Williams's writings on prosody to form a plausible, workable theory is the wrong approach. What if, instead, we were to meet Williams at his chosen level of vagueness? Without attempting to deduce a precise system of scansion, what are the coarser-grained issues at stake in the theory and practice of free verse that Williams sought to express in terms of quantity and the seemingly contradictory metrical lineage that embraces Poe and Whitman, Hopkins and Bridges?²⁷ *Spring and All*, I contend, is a crucial text for thinking through this problem because its very genre, prosimetrum, enacts the

²⁵ I allude here to Williams's remark in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* that *Spring and All* had been a "travesty" on the typographic experiments of the day; *IWW*, 36–37.

²⁶ Cushman warns, "Williams chose to make his stand on prosody and, within prosody, on the variable foot. His defenders attempt to unravel his letters and essays as though they were mystic texts, while his detractors throw up their hands and pronounce him hopeless" (83).

²⁷ See Mariani, p. 546, for the 1947 Salt Lake City address that references Whitman's "Respondez" as a way of articulating the rhythmic lesson Williams took from Whitman, "an example of the kind of relative measure he was looking for, lines disciplined by their parallel syntax, yet capable of expanding and contracting at will" (546). This essay was later published in *English Institute Essays, 1947* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1948). One could speculate endlessly on what drew Williams to Whitman's darkest, most cynical poem—offered as a corrective to the optimistic "universal Esperanto" of "Song of Myself"—and a poem Whitman would suppress from *Leaves of Grass* editions after 1876. Could Whitman's poem, initially called "Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness," have been a point of reference for the violent transformations of spring when Williams set the twiggy stuff of bushes by the road to the contagious hospital to "enter the new world naked" in *Spring and All*?

distinction between verse and prose that is a prerequisite for any theory of free verse prosody.

•

I propose a deliberately vague notion of “pace”—a poetics of pace—to get at how Williams treats the difference between verse and prose in *Spring and All*. I will attempt to stick to poetics in the stricter sense of the conditions of possibility for textual effects (rather than the sense of poetics as *credo*): what does pace make possible (in verse) that prose prevents? Alternatively, what makes pace possible as an effect? As a practice of reading that can be articulated beyond my private experience of the text? The idea that quantity is unworkable is perhaps the one thing that all late twentieth-century theories of prosody can agree upon; and yet, don’t scholars want to be able to talk about the effects of fast-paced lines (or poems) compared to those of slow-paced ones?²⁸ And don’t we readily talk about frenetic poems as opposed to plodding, patient, or meditative ones? This way of speaking shades into interpretive and metaphorical senses of pacing, but that’s precisely where we have been with the confusion of “prose” and “the prosaic” all along. The fogginess of the ideas is part of the enabling fiction.

Pace is the term Williams used to describe the difference between the prose improvisations of *Kora* and “the typically French prose poem”:

But what was such a form to be called? I was familiar with the typically French prose poem, its pace was not the same as my own compositions. What I had

²⁸ A topic of interest at least since Pope’s *Essay on Criticism*. Interestingly, the speeding-up and slowing-down effects in Pope’s celebrated demonstration have at least as much to do with the arrangement of vowels and consonants as with the meter of the lines.

permitted myself could not by any stretch of the imagination be called verse.

Nothing to do but put it down as it stood, trusting to the generous spirit of the age to find a place for it. (*Improvisations*, 29)

What does Williams mean by pace here? Does he mean the pace of their *composition*, jotted down after exhausting twenty-hour days, presented unrevised but with “notes of explanation, often more dense than the first writing” (29)? Baudelaire’s prose poems come across as much more heavily worked and tightly wound in their language compared to the chatty entries in *Kora*, but does that difference signify pace?

Cushman has referred to *Kora in Hell* as a precursor to a new genre Williams would develop in works like *The Descent of Winter*: the “verse journal” or “modern calendar poem.”²⁹ Though Williams’s work in this vein seems highly attuned to seasonal rhythms, Cushman argues that the daily pace of composition, as journal writing, is the most salient quality of the verse journal: “in the absence of agricultural imperatives or liturgical observances, a poet adopts as organizing principle the simple day-by-dayness of the calendar as formal scheme” (*Rigor of Beauty*, 64).

The hurried compositions and their calendrical organization might be combined to give a contrapuntal sense of pace: the fitful starts and stops of each entry against the regular march of the calendar, one night’s crisis slipping away to the next day’s lusty thoughts, or either yielding to measurements for a home-improvement project. As in jazz, pushing or dragging against the underlying beat colors the entire mood of a performance. Likewise, “improvisation” is not as easy as dashing

²⁹ Stephen Cushman, “‘The Descent of Winter’ and the Poetry of the Calendar,” in Ian D. Copestake, ed., *Rigor of Beauty: Essays in Commemoration of William Carlos Williams* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004).

something off in the moment and without revision. It has a negative goal: to avoid old habits of mind and muscle and to play something different from what one has heard and played before. These habits of thought are highly personal: only the player knows if she has successfully broken with old habits; only the imagination is undeceived if the world is a fresh creation or dull plagiarism from instant to instant. The “types” that Williams generally identifies in the interpretive sections of *Kora in Hell*—the poet, the old man, the woman, the farmhand—announce the topoi (or tunes); the improvisations themselves, then, are “variations on a poet,” “variations on a lusty old man,” and so forth.

Or maybe pace lies in the call and response of text and commentary. Pace in this deliberately vague sense (and differences in pace) have a generic significance for Williams, whereas he insists in *Spring and All* that meter has nothing to do with the question whatever (229). These two early works share more than just Williams’s fondness for them. *Kora*, like *Spring and All*, is also a prosimetrum, alternating between prose improvisation and italicized explanation (written at a reflective remove from the original compositions, as with the *Vita Nuova*), and the distinction there is similar to the one between verse and prose in *Spring and All*: a vague sense of pace that includes partly the speed of its composition (quick, fragmentary, and unrevised), partly the “pace” of observation (the fleeting glance), and partly the “pace” of the organizational effort required to assemble the disparate parts into a semi-coherent whole.

The idea that pace is what Williams seeks to modulate, in switching between verse and prose in *Spring and All*, helps to identify shared concerns and techniques

across his works from this period. The challenge is in articulating these comparative traits—fast vs. slow, smooth vs. rough, fleeting vs. sustained thought—without any reliable *units*. I do not find it helpful to take a stopwatch to each syllable, or even to make claims about fast vs. slow lines (or entire poems), and neither does Williams. The crux of the matter remains somewhat vague and not particularly technical—typically, it never really gets you anywhere in a reading of the poems to try to say “how long” “how fast” or “how fleeting/sustained.” Working under stress and at some personal cost,³⁰ I have tried to articulate these distinctions in a more concrete manner: I made sound recordings of myself reading *Spring and All* and *Kora in Hell*, listening to them on my daily Los Angeles commute and trying to hear the difference in pace between the verse and prose passages, and in the shifts of tone within those groups. I set out to “time” the poems and paragraphs and to look for clues in the peaks and valleys of my own performances with the help of computer programs (e.g., the spectrum analyzer in Apple’s *Garage Band*), without any report-worthy observational results.³¹ We use these comparative descriptors without ever really intending to measure them, I think. The trouble is in learning to live with something that is deliberately vague, but nevertheless, still a way of talking “about” rhythm and pacing.

³⁰ The allusion here is an over-identification with two passages in *Spring and All*: “The better work men do is always done under stress and at great personal cost” (188). “The Improvisations—coming at a time when I was trying to remain firm at great personal cost—I had recourse to the expedient of letting life go completely in order to live in the world of my choice. [...] The virtue of the improvisations is their placement in a world of new values—[¶] their fault is their dislocation of sense, often complete. But it is the best I could do under the circumstances” (203).

³¹ My empiricist fantasy on this front has been to submit audio files of performances of the poem to field ornithologists or herpetologists, who have experience measuring the cadences of bird calls or the intervals of frog call-and-response to the thousandth of a second, and see whether they find significant patterns.

A promising approach is suggested by Stephen Adams, in an essay on “The Metrical Contract of *The Cantos*.”³² Trusting his own ear to temper Pound’s pronouncements, Adams draws up an illuminating eight-point list outlining the ways that Pound modulates rhythm in the *Cantos*, both internally from passage to passage and against Pound’s understanding of the English analogues of Greek, Latin, Old English, and German meters.³³ It is a “contract” precisely because both parties have agreed to the terms; if Adams cannot hear the effect, then a particular Poundian pronouncement cannot qualify as part of the set of readerly expectations.

This way of proceeding—sensitive both to the poet’s stated aims and the reader’s ability to perceive them—is in line with the “pragmatic point” that Williams concedes: that the surface appearance of the verse ought to be enough to make a judgment about its rhythmic status. After much hand-wringing, and a level of doubt that echoes Williams’s worries about *Spring and All*, I have become comfortable with the ways in which I find myself talking about pace in that work.³⁴ The spectrum of “pace” distinctions might be articulated in the following ways:

- fast vs. slow
- smooth vs. rough (or other ways describing “flow” or interruption)
- thinking pause vs. poetic observation

³² Stephen J. Adams, “The Metrical Contract of *The Cantos*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 15, no. 1 (1988): 55–72.

³³ See Adams, “The Metrical Contract of *The Cantos*,” 71–72. Earlier in the essay, Adams is especially convincing on the ways in which the *Cantos* fall into and out of a three-stress line. Adams too examines quantitative and isochronous theories, treating them with less skepticism than I have above.

³⁴ Alluding again to *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, 37: “It made sense to me, at least to my disturbed mind—because it *was* disturbed at that time—but I doubt if it made sense to anyone else.” As I argue earlier in the chapter, Williams develops a double voice in *Spring and All* in an attempt to manage these disturbing doubts, risking the sacrifice of sense in the prose, but “keep[ing] the poems pure” (37).

- fleeting thought vs. sustained meditation
- glance vs. Gaze
- aside/tangent/digression vs. main point

In many cases, these distinctions have subjective and objective aspects: they describe a reader's experience in reading, but also a sense of how large a claim on one's attention the poem or prose passage is making. Some poems record short but coherent imagistic observations—poem I ["Spring and All"] or XXII ["The Red Wheelbarrow"], for instance. In these poems, it is sometimes difficult to determine the pace: are they snapshots or composed photographs? Drive-by observations or long, careful gazes? The more disjunctive poems, however, offer a clearer sense of movement and frenetic pace. Poem VIII ["At the Faucet of June"] sets a much more ambitious pace than almost any of the other poems, and as a result is one of the most difficult to account for. Here are the first four stanzas:

The sunlight in a
yellow plaque upon the
varnished floor

is full of a song
inflated to
fifty pounds pressure

at the faucet of
June that rings
the triangle of the air

pulling at the
anemones in
Persephone's cow pasture—(196)

The succession of images here is difficult enough to follow, and even more so when one also confronts the cascading syntax, which never quite allows the reader to locate

a sentence ending that is not immediately pulled forward into the next phrase. The sequence in lines four to seven is particularly dense: the sunlit floor of the first stanza has become filled with a song, itself filled with air at fifty psi (within the recommended tire pressure range for a 1923 Ford Model T). Before there is time to sort out the double-filling (or how to get from “full” to “inflated”—contents placed under pressure), air pressure gives way to water pressure at the faucet (fifty psi more than good enough for a nice shower). At this point, the governing trope of the poem reveals itself to be zeugma, with “fifty pounds pressure” serving both phrases: “inflated to / fifty pounds pressure” (air) and “fifty pounds pressure / at the faucet” (water).³⁵ Having been duly noted, these technical specs (automotive and plumbing-related) give way to a metaphor—it is a “faucet of / June,”—but even here the sentence will not come to rest: “the faucet of / June that rings / the triangle,” and so on, tumbling down to the end of the poem where it takes three noun phrases without a verb to finally bring the thing to a halt: “wind, earthquakes in / Manchuria, a / partridge / from dry leaves.” The poem is fast-paced, but in a jerking and halting way, rather than a smooth acceleration to cruising speed. The knotty syntax exerts an opposite pressure on the sense of speed, though, requiring frequent pauses and circling back, which slows the poem down. Poetry readers tend to look to the poem itself for hints about how to approach it, but this poem, mischievously, may be deliberately giving out bad or contradictory advice. The rapid succession of images suggests a fast pace, but there are no guardrails for the hairpin syntax and lineation. When speed

³⁵On a hunch, I had hoped to confirm fifty psi as a viable range for the air pressure inside the tubes of the Parisian *poste pneumatique*, but have been unable to do so.

overrides syntax in this way, the sound is no longer an echo to the sense, but a challenge to or critique of sense (or any convoluted sentence structure that cannot keep up with fast-paced imagery). A gust of wind, an earthquake, a startled bird: the last three images each evoke the surprise and unpredictability that are probably the desired results of this poem, rather than challenges to be overcome.

Not all of the poems are quite this disjunctive, though, and this poem's cubist flair is framed by an extended gloss on Juan Gris in the surrounding prose passages, which lends some context to the style. In fact, the prose at page 197 picks up right where it left off (with a comma) on 194, before pausing mid-sentence for poems VII and VIII. This mid-sentence break seems significant, since it happens nowhere else in the work. The poems function as one giant aside to the following sentence:

But such a picture as that of Juan Gris, though I have not seen it in color, is important as marking more clearly than any I have seen what the modern trend is: the attempt is being made to separate things of the imagination from life, and obviously, by using the forms common to experience so as not to frighten the onlooker away but to invite him, [here Williams interrupts with VII and VIII] things with which he is familiar, simple things—at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination. (197)

If zeugma was the principle trope of poem VIII, it also serves to describe the function of the poems in the prose-verse-prose block: the poems are both illustrations of the argumentative point of the prose, and a deliberate break with prosaic "argument." It is hard to see how a poem as difficult as VIII could actually advance an argument rather than confuse it, but structurally "The rose is obsolete" and "The sunlight in a / yellow

plaque” are contained syntactically by the sentence above, suggesting that they are there as “examples” to bolster Williams’s case. It may be that the framing prose enables some of the wildness of poem VIII: The prose elsewhere in *Spring and All* is riddled with dropped threads and false starts, but the continuity here gives the poems a bit more cover to run wild.

It is more common for the prose to be disjunctive or even flippant in order to place a contrastive emphasis on the poems’ presumed seriousness. Williams often leaves the last line of prose before a poem without final punctuation, suggesting that the poetic thought flows syntactically from the preceding prose, but with the one exception noted above, this pretended continuity is quickly found out. Likewise, the prose sections typically re-start after a poem with a short declarative proposition that re-establishes the conclusory tone of the prose, contrasted to the less bossy, expository tone of the verse texts:

The fixed categories into which life is divided must always hold. (224)

When in the condition of imaginative suspense only will the writing have reality, as explained partially in what precedes (206)

or better: prose has to do with the fact of an emotion; poetry has to do with the dynamization of emotion into separate form. (219)

It is rarely understood how such plays as Shakespeare’s were written—or in fact how any work of value has been written, the practical bearing of which is that only as the work was produced, in that way alone can it be understood (214–15)

To clarify, Williams's prose is conclusory and contains manifesto-like pronouncements, but it also takes pains to avoid sounding pompous:

So, after this tedious diversion—whatever of dull you find among my work,
put it down to criticism, not to poetry (198)

Anyhow the change of Baroja interested me (221)

[Marianne Moore's] work puzzles me. It is difficult to quote convincingly.
(231)

(If an error is noted here, pay no attention to it.) (182)

But this smacks too much of the nature of—This is all negative and appears to
be boastful. It is not intended to be so. Rather the opposite. (189)

Williams at times will try to minimize the importance of a passage—he's just "jotting" it down, after all (186)—but (following Cushman's reading of the "dailiness" of the verse journal) these modest asides serve to mark the genre of the text, so they are hardly throwaway lines, nor are they meant to minimize their content.

Within the poems, Williams favors local, grammatical effects over rhetorical gestures. To slow a poem down, or make it seem more meditative, the classic Williams maneuver is to minimize the verb (or make it abstract) and bring forward spatial relations such as prepositions. The Red Wheelbarrow (poem XXII) is just such a prepositional poem, the direction of its poetic gaze is governed completely by "upon," "with," and "beside." But this technique is not exclusive to the poems. The well-known ekphrasis to Juan Gris's "The Open Window" (most likely the black and white image he's referring in the sentence introducing VII and VIII) applies much the same style of description: "Here is a shutter, a bunch of grapes, a sheet of music, a

picture of sea and mountains [. . .]. One thing laps over on the other, the cloud laps over on the shutter, the bunch of grapes is part of the handle of the guitar, the mountain and sea are obviously not “the mountain and sea,” but a picture of the mountain and sea” (198). The “lapping over” in this passage mirrors the zeugma of poem VIII and the mixed rhythmical message it sends. On the one hand, the imagistic poems lack verbs with strong movement and seem slow, but on the other hand, the overlapping makes them feel rushed. Yes, an image is achieved here, but its complexity lies in the contradictory indications of pace.

The spacing of Williams’s prepositional technique is commonly thought to be wholly motivated by the imagistic impulse: he is describing a canvas, or a canvas-like scene, so working out these spatial relations is of utmost importance. But the contrast between disjunctive sequence and thickly described canvases also has an effect on pace—a temporal concern that reaches beyond the tenets of imagism.

III: How to Describe the Verse-Prose Unit of *Spring and All*

Spring and All does not exactly tell you how to read it, at least not at first. Chapter headings are out of sequence, in roman and Arabic numerals, printed upside down. At the beginning of this work, the poet is not your friend. He is barking directions, shouting in all caps, making pointless cross-references. On the basis of the first ten pages or so, one might say that, if the work is a prosimetrum, then the basic “unit” of the book is five or six pages of prose containing as many false starts and out-of-sequence chapter headings, followed by two heavily enjambed but syntactically regular verse poems, follow by more of the same prose shenanigans. Williams’s

deliberately haphazard numbering scheme shapes from the beginning our experience of the work.

But the playful chapter headings in the prose peter out after the first ten pages.³⁶ Indeed there are no headings for any of the prose after poems III and IV (186–87). The work then settles in to a fairly regular rhythm: about two and a half pages of prose (in 20 to 30 short paragraphs) followed by either two or four verse poems (or two poems followed by two or three pages of prose). Williams's reasons for the haphazard headings seem clear enough: it was yet another way to distinguish his treatment of prose from his treatment of verse. As Williams recalls in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*:

[*Spring and All*] consists of poems interspersed with prose, the same idea as IMPROVISATIONS. It was written when all the world was going crazy about typographical form and is really a travesty on the idea. Chapter headings are printed upside down on purpose, the chapters are numbered all out of order, sometimes with a Roman numeral, sometimes with an Arabic, anything that came in handy. The prose is a mixture of philosophy and nonsense. It made sense to me, at least to my disturbed mind—because it *was* disturbed at that time—but I doubt if it made any sense to anyone else. But the poems were kept pure—no typographical tricks when they appear—set off from the prose. They

³⁶ The roman numeral headings for the poems are sequential (the omission of VII before “The rose is obsolete” at 195 is an omission the editors chose not to correct; see 502). The prose headings are, in order: [title page]; “CHAPTER 19” (178); “CHAPTER XIII” (180; printed upside down); “CHAPTER VI” (181); “CHAPTER 2” (182); “CHAPTER XIX” (182); “THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM” (182; sub-heading, printed smaller than chapter headings); Poem “I” (183), Poem “II” (184); “CHAPTER I” followed immediately by the subheading “SAMUEL BUTLER” in smaller type (185). Following this, there are no new prose headings for the rest of the work.

are numbered consistently; none had titles though they were to have titles later when they were reprinted in *Collected Poems*. (IWW, 36–37)

Here as elsewhere, Williams insists that the poems form the core of the work, and the prose is merely contrastive, a way to underscore the relative importance of the poetic texts. Perhaps Williams simply grew tired of the conceit, having sufficiently lampooned typographical tricks and made clear that they would not be allowed in the verse sections. In any case, the chaotic opening suggests that the prose of *Spring and All* is subject to some sort of disorder—either willful or by neglect—whereas some additional *care* has been taken to arrange the poems in an orderly fashion. In insisting that the poems remain a gimmick-free zone, Williams continues the anti-rhetorical line of American poetry inaugurated with Whitman’s claim to have “succeeded at last” in “leaving out all the ‘stock’ poetical touches” from *Leaves of Grass*.³⁷ (Here Whitman utilizes the negative valences of “to leave” and “touch” that often go unremarked. Wouldn’t it have been more appropriate for the all-encompassing poetic project to include—to *leave in*—all the ornamental phrases, lest a catalogue of all the poet’s “touches” remain incomplete?) But Whitman’s claim is quite specific—that leaving out such phrases has not come naturally, but is difficult poetic labor—and this places him, perhaps surprisingly, at the beginning of a tradition that prizes the self-restraint of the poet. Whitman’s marriage of a realist aesthetic that is all-encompassing in content

³⁷ In a diary entry included in *Specimen Days*. “Through Eight Years” lists in a short paragraph several major events in Whitman’s life between 1848 and 1855, from the end of his time at the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* through the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Immediately after the line about poetical touches, he closes the entry with its date of composition “I am now (1856–7) passing through my 37th year.” This line recalls Whitman’s reference to his age in the opening of “Song of Myself,” though interestingly, he had removed the reference to his age after 1855 (where it appeared in a later section) and would not reinsert it until 1881. Walt Whitman, *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 20.

to a restrained ideal of verse that refuses rhetorical “touches” (in the service of the same idea of realism and immediacy), is just the tradition that Williams would take up (and also Riding and Stein, in their divergent ways).

The opening chaos—the orchestral tune-up—at the outset of *Spring and All* resembles something like Whitman’s 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*: a work of art in its own right to be sure, but the purpose is to create contrast rather than continuity with what follows. Whitman did not exactly choose boring prose for the 1855 preface, but the two-column format doubly presents the squared-off, fully-justified format that he would take leave of in the free verse poems that followed (and, in later editions, with language lifted verbatim from the preface but inserted into poems).³⁸ Whitman’s prose preface, radical itself, establishes a stable norm of “prose” against which the verse of *Leaves of Grass* is perceived as verse.³⁹ The hyperactive headings and typographic innovations of the opening prose passages of *Spring and All* serve much the same purpose. In order to keep the poems “pure,” as he says was his intention, the prose must be impure, and radically so.

Many of the most memorable passages from *Spring and All* occur in this opening sequence, and none is more notorious than the stated intention that “Tomorrow we the people of the United States are going to Europe armed to kill every man, woman and child in the area west of the Carpathian Mountains (also east) sparing none” (178). This passage has become something of a red herring for many

³⁸ “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” most famously.

³⁹ In many cases the language is not remarkably different, but the concept of a line has shifted from column-shaped containers to a mere annoyance. Whitman’s prose block conforms to typographical conventions of the page, where his verse line is conceptual, regularly extending beyond even the generous margin of the page in the large trim size of the 1855 edition.

readers; its bombast masks several more subtle echoes. It is true that this imagined destruction of western civilization takes aim at the mandarin attitudes of Pound and Eliot.⁴⁰ But it is a gross oversimplification to say that Williams is simply imaginatively lashing out against the continental and expatriate circles from which he would remain estranged nearly his entire career. For starters, this revenge fantasy is completely reciprocal: “First we shall kill them and then they, us” (179). Second, the reversed order of killing here suggests that he also has an eye on a certain playful approach to time. Even at its most bloody and dramatic, Williams’s opening is toying with ideas of sequence, pacing, and disrupting what is presumed to be the normal flow of time from instant to instant. In wishing for the destruction of “the greatness of life’s inanity; the formality of its boredom; the orthodoxy of its stupidity” (179), Williams suggests that it really doesn’t matter who kills whom first: it’s all just a boring repetition anyway, unless something truly new intervenes.

The genocidal vision sketched out here has not aged well, and it is difficult to read this (especially aloud) without a shudder and a groan. But the vision of total violence was never really the point. Most readers, I think, might recognize this thought

⁴⁰ There is an echo here of the one fully negative moment in Whitman’s 1855 preface. In almost every case, negative attitudes and actions are accepted and encompassed by the poet. See the huge catalog of vices all “duly realized and returned” at pp. 631–32 in Michael Moon’s Norton Critical Edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The one aspect of America that Whitman does not recuperate in this way is organized religion: “There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait a while . . . perhaps a generation or two . . . dropping off by degrees. A superior breed shall take their place . . . the gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place. The new order shall arise and they shall be priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest” (634). Williams follows Whitman here in imagining the passing of the era of cultural priests such as Eliot. Of course, this did not come to pass, and the publication of “The Waste Land,” to which many have theorized that the opening of *Spring and All* is responding, a blow that Williams took famously hard: “I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years, and I’m sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of the new art form itself-rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew that in certain ways I was defeated” (*Autobiography*, 174).

experiment from Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where the philosopher advances a theory that, in order to account for change in time and because all change must have a cause, God is supposed to destroy and recreate the world from instant to instant.⁴¹ This has been referred to as the "cinematographic theory of motion as a succession of static objects . . . a conception that precludes events as such."⁴² Williams follows this progression to a T: after the complete destruction of all human life, everything up to the previous moment is spontaneously recreated exactly as before:

Now, in the imagination, all flesh, all human flesh has been dead upon the earth for ten million, billion years. The bird has turned into a stone within whose heart an egg, unlaied, remained hidden.

It is spring! but miracle of miracles a miraculous miracle has gradually taken place during these seemingly wasted eons. Through the orderly sequence of unmentionable time EVOLUTION HAS REPEATED ITSELF FROM THE BEGINNING.

Good God!

⁴¹ In the third meditation. This passage also echoes Poe's "The Power of Words," in which the post-apocalyptic angel Agathos advances a theory of infinite creation out of even the smallest linguistic utterance. See Poe, *Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 822–25. Agathos argues "no thought can perish, so no act is not without infinite result" and that words, as "impulses on the air," have physical consequences that become quite significant once far enough along the infinite chain of results (823, 825). As he contemplates the "final overthrow of the earth" with his friend Oinos, Agathos becomes saddened by the sight of a beautiful green star that was born of "a few passionate sentences" he spoke to his lover three centuries earlier, finally realizing the truth of his impassioned statement upon seeing its physical manifestation in the flowers and volcanoes of the star's surface (825). Poe also advances a theory of "retrogradation"—the "faculty of referring at *all* epochs, *all* effects to *all* causes—by which science might trace the chain of cause and effect far enough back to discover the original impulse that triggered the existence of any one among the "numberless comets" (Poe's example, 824).

⁴² See Thomas M. Lennon, writing specifically about motion in time with reference to Decartes, Hume, and Bergson: Thomas M. Lennon, "Hume's Conditions for Causation: Further to Gray and Imlay," *Hume Studies* 8.2 (1982), 120.

Every step once taken in the first advance of the human race, from the amoeba to the highest type of intelligence, has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded in the dead ages gone by. A perfect plagiarism results. Everything is and is new. Only the imagination is undeceived. (181)

This secret, yet “perfect plagiarism” from instant to instant is a kind of anti-repetition: wiping away all precedents so that “everything that is and is new.” It is a repetition forward, rather than a circling back; the echo precedes the (imaginative) event that caused it. Descartes found his method of radical doubt to be necessary because he otherwise could not shake old habits of mind. Williams engages in something similar as a way of re-writing the modernist rhetoric of novelty to suit his own purposes, at once comically overblown and sarcastically de-fanged. The real punchline in this passage is buried: the “gradual” taking place of the miraculous miracle and the “orderly sequence” of evolution’s recapitulation. The destruction of the world may have taken a page or so, and its recreation over a billion years a paragraph, but Williams wants to insist that the process has been gradual and orderly. The incongruous pacing creates a sense of readerly whiplash: while astronomical time is dashed off in a two-sentence paragraph, this whole process brings us up to the same “now” that would have resulted without the entire destruction and recreation of the world. We have gone everywhere and nowhere in a page, but gradually and in an orderly manner!⁴³

⁴³ The jolting mismatch in the scale of the thing repeated recalls the opening of the penultimate chapter of Thoreau’s *Walden*, in which he provides this economical account of the second year he spent by the

This sort of counterpoint between speed and scale on one end and pace or attention on the other is one of the most prominent features of this work. Williams announces here—in the destructive opening—the kind of book and the kind of poetry he is writing. The Williams of *Spring and All* is interested in time, even interested in history, but less so in meter, repetition, or even in figures of rhythm. In the place of rhythm and meter, Williams proposes something like pace: especially once the haphazard headings fall away, a different rhythm emerges for the relation of verse to prose. The verse and prose sections regulate themselves as fast-paced or slow-paced relative to one another, and sometimes in striking counterpoint. Some are meditative; some are frenetic. Some rewrite the history of the world in a few paragraphs; others linger over a backyard scene, a street sign, or a pastoral landscape.

IV: Jotting, Distracted Driving

“Quand on lit trop vite ou trop doucement on n’entend rien”
—Pascal⁴⁴

“The man who had put eleven cars through their paces, often pulling out to the left (or right) to pass some sonofabitch who was driving too slow, racing down state highways to get where he had to go, the man who had composed thousands of lines while driving alone on his rounds . . .”
(Mariani, 682)

To pause or not to pause? It seems commonly accepted, when reading modern American poetry aloud, to omit or at least to minimize any pause at line endings where the lines are enjambed. Most poetry readers, I would argue, tend to give syntax more credence than lineation in determining the pace and the pauses of their reading. It

pond: “Thus was my first year’s life in the woods completed; and the second year was similar to it. I finally left Walden September 6th, 1847.”

⁴⁴ Also the epigraph to Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979). See the discussion at, p. 88n3 in Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986); the running text callout for this note is on p. 62.

seems equally clear, though, that one of the things that distinguishes verse from prose is the insistence upon the significance of the line as a unit. That is, even if we decreasingly allow a breath-pause at the ends of line, we insist that there is a thinking pause (*pause pensée*): a moment to reflect on the line as a unit before the incremental extensions, ironic reversals, or unremarkable continuations that generally happen across the enjambment.

On the one hand, poetry is supposed to control this rhythm to ensure that we read at the right pace. On the other hand, of course there are times where we have read poems too quickly (Ammons's "Reflective") or too slowly (a tedious classroom close reading of an O'Hara lunch poem) to understand them.

Williams's *Spring and All* puts these thought pauses front and center. Almost half of the lines in poem XIII are made up of single words, as in this first stanza:

Crustaceous
wedge
of sweaty kitchens
on rock
overtopping
thrusts of the sea (211)

Looking forward to XXII (The Red Wheelbarrow), which will break words into their compounds (wheel / barrow, rain / water), "overtopping" in the fifth line seems to make most sense as part of a compound adjective: "rock-overtopping" (describing the thrusts of the sea). The poem goes on to recount the construction of a bridge, with

triphammers driving the pilings into “lakes” (16) and “old pastures” (22).⁴⁵ This too is a trick of pace: the bridge construction is being described, or better, *experienced* in this poem from the longer *durée* perspective of the fields and bridge themselves. The bridge is “new” to a human observer and could take years to build, but it is immediately assimilated by the landscape: “The aggregate / is untamed / encapsulating / irritants.” “Untamed” drives this point home with some efficiency: there is no moment of “development” where the bridge—or the conversion into pasture, for that matter—is a civilizing imposition on the landscape; instead each of these becomes naturalized, to the point that the entire landscape remains wild, as if untouched by human activity.

So the fast pace of the single-word lines works against the infrastructure-based perspective, where each line might take years. The anthropomorphizing of the “arms and legs” of the bridge pilings do not make these structures more human-like; they sharpen the distinction between the human perspective and the bridge’s perspective. What look like unmovable spires and stanchions to us are arms and legs that actively “dodge / motorcars” in the slowed-down temporal perspective of the bridge itself. The bridge pillar is not dodging each motorcar as it passes: dodging here is a hundred-year-long “movement” in which the bridge dodges motorcars by not putting down its legs in the middle of the roadway. Williams out-maneuvers the question of whether the lines, or the elapsed time of the poem, are fast or slow by shifting the standard of measure for such things onto the perspective of the bridge. What takes years to us is a

⁴⁵ Later in the poem, the lake and pastures are redescribed as ventricles of a heart.

simple dodge to the bridge and field. Pace, in this poem, is not an effect to be achieved either sonically or rhetorically; it is a problem to be explored.

•

But does the phenomenology of reading the poem work in concert, or in counterpoint, with this exploration of pacing? It remains unclear whether shorter lines (with more frequent thought-pauses) actually make for faster-paced reading performances than longer lines with traditionally faster-paced sonic features like triple meters and alliteration on easily pronounceable phonemes. Is the short-lined poem faster because it's short, or slower because the lines must expand somewhat to fill up a predetermined unit known as the line? Likewise, do I read a poem faster than, say, a chapter of a novel, simply because it is shorter? What is the length of a "sitting" in Poe's dictum that a poem be short enough (about 100 lines) to read in one sitting?⁴⁶

Surely one makes one's way more slowly through a book of poems than a novel, no? The slower-going pace of the poem, even a brisk poem, has to do with bridging the gaps between the lines. The difference in pace is like that between walking along a well-maintained path and picking one's way across a boulder field,

⁴⁶ Surely it varies from person to person, or even culture to culture. I am reminded of Robert Levine, *A Geography of Time* (New York: Basic, 1997). Levine takes a deliberately naïve approach the the question of different perceptions of time in different cultures. He and his students measure the "pace of life" in 31 countries, and 36 U.S. cities, by clocking things like the average length of time it takes residents to buy a stamp at the post office, to get change for a \$5 (or equivalent), and to walk a distance of 60 feet in a downtown area. Levine's inquiry into pace of life was started when he found himself increasingly frustrated by a lax approach to punctuality during a visiting professorship in Brazil. Getting past frustration, Levine noticed that his students simply had a different set of conventions for what constituted the start and end time of his classes, office hours, and so on. Levine's American students (in Fresno) showed up to class on time, but also started rustling papers like clockwork at five minutes before the end of the scheduled period. His Brazilian students might show up 30 minutes late, but were equally happy to stay an hour past the scheduled end without even perceiving that class had gone over. Time in Williams's poems works this way, some keeping rigorous time and others unhurried.

step by step. The experience of the indeterminate Williams enjambment in the early short-lined poems is like this, where one never knows in advance which breaks will provide a smooth continuation of syntax and which a polysemous gap that gives one pause, until a new footing is found or a new path forward revealed that was not apparent from the previous stance. Line by line, the reader picks his way, stepping onto one boulder before beginning to consider how to get from that one to the next. Or, to rephrase in the driving metaphor Williams was so fond of: poetry has potholes where prose has smooth pavement.

Poetry's more indigenous discourses, meter and prosody, are also concerned with time in the form of sonic repetition. The intervals between accent, rhyme, or other repetitions can be measured in time—or by their position in the line or stanza—but clock time here seems beside the point.

All of these approaches, it seems, aim at a description of rhetorical time that is expressed through phenomenological means: caesura, enjambment, the recurrence of rhyme. These vary from reading to reading, but the pauses have a temporal status analogous to logical priority: a rhetorical temporality.⁴⁷ In the same way that one step in an argument comes “before” another, so the pause at the end of a line comes before the continuation of the next line. These sequences are built-in to the structure of the poem, and meant to be significant.

As with the “pace of life” in Brazil compared to Fresno (see n45), there is a kernel of truth in the cultural stereotypes about pace. So too, I would argue, is there some truth in received ideas about the pace of poetry. Poetry reads at a different pace

⁴⁷ Not to be confused with a rhetoric *of* temporality.

than prose—this seems indisputable, despite the hand-wringing over the proper meaning of prose which this dissertation is consumed with. But then what about prose poetry? It seems that we ought to admit different paces of reading within poetry as well. Even if prose poetry (or passage of prose interspersed with verse, as in *Spring and All*) reads at a different pace than non-poetic prose, it seems easy enough to concede that we do not pause to think at the end of each line of a prose text block. Does a prose poem, then, read “faster”? Do the prose sections of *Spring and All* read faster than the verse?

The punchy opening pages of *Spring and All* also operate on the scale of geological or evolutionary time, so the vast time-perspective of poem XIII is not unexpected. Instead, it sets up an apples-to-apples comparison: freewheeling prose on an evolutionary scale against the brief and short-lined *longue durée* lyric poem. The juxtaposition of a tiny, short-lined lyric poem with a centuries-wide observational perspective is precisely the kind of cross-purposed time effect underlying much of the project of exploring unconventional pacing in *Spring and All*.

These poems have two (or more) distinct paces because there are usually two (or more) elements in motion in any given Williams poem: the physical pace of the lines, but also the pace of his imagination. The closing stanzas of poem XXIV help to clarify this doubling of pace, in this case the miles-per-hour of the doctor’s car and the historical overlay of the “canopy of leaves” with which the poem opens onto the domed roof of the prehistoric cave with which it ends.

He who has kissed
a leaf

need look no further—
I ascend

through
a canopy of leaves

and at the same time
I descend

for I do nothing
Unusual—

I ride in my car
I think about

prehistoric caves
in the Pyrenees—

the cave of
Les Trois Frères (228–29)

It is a cubist insight—the leaves are constantly turning, shifting, and overlapping one another. The idea of a single “clarity, outline of leaf” (as poem “I” has it) is shown to be a fiction, or at least a fleeting moment artificially isolated from movement and context. Williams draws the leaves from multiple perspectives, as a cubist would, but his palette is somewhat different. In this poem he is not setting up camera angles (as in the prepositional poems); here the shifting perspectives are history and a metonymic association that moves from one kind of overlapping outline to another.

The overlapping leaves of the canopy formed over a tree-lined country lane get re-drawn as the overlapping cave drawings of *Les Trois Frères*. The composite figure layers these figures of overlapping on top of one another: the overlapping leaf outlines resemble overlapping cave paintings. And a further layering occurs among the time periods evoked: the now of Williams’s drive, the historical painting, the occasional

composition (because the poem cannot pre-date the 1914 discovery of the cave), and the present “now” of the poem’s grammatical tense.

That Williams ascends and descends through this canopy of canopies “at the same time” is a kind of inside joke, then, meant to point up the absurdity of a frozen-in-time “eternal now” of the lyric, or the oversimplified idea that mere sequence—I do this, I do that—could account for this time-travelling poem. In this poem, Williams is driving—already covering ground fairly quickly for any lyric observations to take hold, but his imagination is moving even faster: flipping centuries back to a prehistoric cave. Or perhaps he was merely reading about the cave of *Les Trois Frères* earlier that day, and this is a simple act of memory.

This kind of rhythmic multitasking gives the lie to the pat simplicity of what Frank O’Hara would term “I do this, I do that.” Far from being simple, these concurrent rhythms and counter-rhythms form a poetic core for what these poems *do* that is far more complex than the presentation of an image.

IV, Continued: Drive-by Writing in *Spring and All*

As in poem XXIV, Williams’s poet is probably driving during the first poem of *Spring and All*, when he paints the scene of the first stirring of spring “by the road to the contagious hospital” (183). It is an easily-missed feint (and a decisive break with imagism) in the poem later known as “Spring and All”: the hospital mentioned in the first line of the poem is probably not even present in the wide-angle image the poem ultimately produces. The poet is “by the road” *to* the hospital but not yet anywhere close to this destination.

With the distant hospital not as vanishing point, but fully outside the framed image, the poem suggests a scale that can only be covered by automobile. How else would the poet find himself in the stark, rural scene, but still on the way into the hospital in town? The pace of the poem emerges from the back-and-forth between a sweeping, blurred vista of brown (“broad, muddy fields / brown with dried reeds”), and a close-up, detailed specificity (“one by one, objects are defined”). The first suggests a moving view, a drive-by poetic snapshot, but the second evokes a static position: perhaps someone who has pulled over to the side of the road and gotten out to examine “clarity, outline of leaf.”

Poem III performs the opposite operation, zooming out from a walker’s perspective to a poet-driver’s wider-angled lens. It begins,

The farmer deep in thought
is pacing through the rain
among his blank fields, with
hand in pockets,
in his head
the harvest already planted. (186).

The farmer’s “pacing” is the classic etymological topos of verse (from *versus*, the turn at the end of a farmer’s furrow): his blank fields a blank page. The farmer on foot is taking in a wide landscape—composing the harvest—and it would seem that we had already arrived at a poetic scenario mirroring poem I: the scene of potentiality, where there are almost no visible signs of spring returning, but the knowing farmer-observer sees and comprehends what is soon to come. It would be easy to assume that Williams

identifies with this deep-thinking farmer, and that this poem puts him forward as a stand-in for the poetic observer. But the poet and his car enter in the final sentence, and the poem pulls back to reveal an even wider perspective that is opposed to the farmer's natural rhythms.

Down past the brushwood
bristling by
the rainsluiced wagonroad
looms the artist figure of
the farmer—composing
—antagonist (186)

The farmer here is the same, but shown from a different angle. The image has pulled back to reveal the artist's canvas on which the figure of the painter is drawn (or the poem in which the figure of the farmer is placed). What Williams adds to this classical scene of the versifying farmer is a different sense of pace. Where the opening image presents a farmer in tune with the rhythm of the seasons, pacing on foot, imagining and anticipating planting and eventual harvest, the closing image suggests a different pace altogether. The windshield view covers much more ground: the farmer and field plus the brushwood and wagonroad. Where the farmer is deep in thought, the poet has one eye on the ruts in the road. Both farmer and poet are "composing," but the farmer's composition extends over months while the poetic snapshot is jotted down on the fly, perhaps not even to be revised. As in poem I, it is the back-and-forth between the meditative seeing and the drive-by snapshot that forms the rhythmic signature of

Spring and All. Williams records the farmer's meditative thinking, but has no time to perform it himself, as the prose paragraph leading in to this poem makes clear:

—they ask us to return to the proven truths of tradition, even to the twice proven, the substantiality of which is known. [Charles] Demuth and a few others do their best to point out the error, telling us that design is a function of the IMAGINATION, describing its movement, its colors—but it is a hard battle. I myself seek to enter the lists with these few notes jotted down in the midst of the action, under distracting circumstances—to remind myself (see p. 177, paragraph 6) of the truth. (186)

To jot: from *iota*, as the smallest letter of the Greek language. Here Williams, as war correspondent, introduces another sense of pace: the pace of composition. Williams, with his disdain for revision, would aim for (and claim) a pure spontaneity, not just the ironic performance of *sprezzatura*. But it is a mark of his poetic honesty that he includes, if also resents as “antagonist,” the older poetic figure of the farmer pacing in his field. In not being a blind champion for new modernist compositions, Williams sets himself apart from other moderns (who explored automatic writing as the vanguard of a new psychology of writing) and even later poets and artists who prized spontaneity or established chance-based compositional procedures to defeat modernist figures of mastery. Williams's poet does not see himself as a master, but merely a jousting contestant seeking to “enter the lists” of those who would attempt to forge a new path, or a war correspondent reporting “in the midst of the action.” The break from modernist boosterism is refreshing; as Williams acknowledges at the end of poem V (and in a way that Pound and other manifesto writers would never admit):

“How easy to slip / into the old mode, how hard to / cling firmly to the advance—”
(191).

•

In the near-century since *Spring and All*, the automobile has become emblematic of the “pace of modern life” for literary and popular culture, loaded up with countless associations: the open road of the Beats, cruising in *American Graffiti*, the car-as-office/breakfast table phenomenon sometimes associated with commuters in Los Angeles. The prevailing metaphors for driving have been dubbed and overdubbed with various mixtures of freedom, nostalgia, and soulless grind. But in the same year Frost’s poetic persona is still wandering about New England on horseback, Williams is deciding whether the dashboard view is poetic or prosaic. This is the question the form of *Spring and All* sets out. Pound had already posited an answer to the question for mass transit a decade earlier, and there are plenty of nineteenth century precedents for poetic responses to train travel.⁴⁸ Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” is thoroughly, emblematically, modern, even though it is meant to be just an image (a spectacular, failed attempt at a non-metaphor).⁴⁹ Clearly the sped-up pace of life in Pound’s metro

⁴⁸ Emerson declared the train fit for poetic consumption in “The Poet.” Whitman would make extensive use of railroads in his poetic imagery, catalogs, and addresses through the following decades. Also, Dickinson’s “I like to see it lap the miles,” and so on. Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote what might be the first of a genre—blank verse train travel poems. Thanks to Alan Young-Bryant for this last point, and see his *Perverse Form in Victorian Lyric*, PhD Diss., Cornell University, 2011, for an excellent reading of figures of silence in Rossetti.

⁴⁹ In poem XXV (p. 231–32), Williams has greater success achieving a less metaphorical engagement with mass transit by taking the ironic route: listing under “AXCIOMS” the delightful instructions of a governmental agency advising pedestrians and train riders: “Don’t get killed” (9); Careful Crossing Campaign / Cross Crossings Carefully” (10–11); “Take the Pelham Bay Park Branch / of the Lexington Ave. (East Side) / Line and you are there in a few / minutes” (23–26). A collage of road signs and announcements, the poem signs off by identifying its bureaucratic poet-speaker: “Interborough Rapid Transit Co.” (27). The redundancy of the careful crossing campaign, in name and in slogan, results in a hilarious musical alliteration that Pound would probably not risk. And Williams gets to have it all—the

is modern, and the way of seeing he advocates is poetic. That is, he acknowledges that it is quite impossible to stop and smell the roses while riding the subway, or to smell roses inside the train speeding past, although the indistinct “apparition” can still be claimed for poetry. It seems basic to put it this way, but what makes car travel different from mass transit is that the driver can start and stop at will. There are no timetables (and one assumes traffic rules were still quite chaotic at the time Williams took up driving). I can be speeding along one moment, and stopped (smelling the roses) the next. The irregular start-stop pace of a poem like “Spring and All” brings this difference to the fore.

Who before Williams had thought to write a poem from the perspective of the observer who is also the driver? I haven’t found an earlier example, so I will venture the tentative claim that Williams is the first to decide whether driving ought to be verse or prose. And he might have decided that the rhythm, concentration, and overall pace of driving was not suited for verse. Surely any driver has far too many claims on his attention to also engage in poetic seeing. Surely running rounds, making house calls, prevents this kind of seeing and amounts to a prosaic drudgery that speeds past all the trees, buds, leafpiles, and flowers that Williams is still clearly preoccupied with elsewhere in his verse. It is his preoccupation with pace—and its proper literary forms—that prompts the choice in *Spring and All*.

And yet, he chooses verse for driving. Introduced in this first poem, the alternation of speed and stasis will become emblematic of pace in the poems that

hilarity of the simple message and the gravitas (as an M.D.) of probably knowing first hand the dire consequences for pedestrians who do not following this advice.

follow. While few poems in *Spring and All* seem entirely written from a moving-car perspective, I count eleven that have at least one image of driving or that take in a sweeping vista that suggests the frame of a dashboard. Sometimes as short as one line, the suggestions that the observer is speeding past in a car often clash with the minute observations elsewhere in the poem.

Putting the poet in the driver's seat ends up in an oddly literal recapitulation of a favorite topos for the poetic self: the charioteer of Plato's *Phaedrus*. Socrates' figure for the contest between temperance and mania is the charioteer with three horses, who must control the horses' contradictory impulses to control his vehicle. Commentary on *Phaedrus* has been too quick to read this metaphorically as an abstract matter of control, modulation, and balance: the kinds of things that can be described in terms of emphasis and stress. But perhaps choosing a charioteer as the central figure of the poet speaks to a less abstract challenge. Why not lend Plato the courage of his metaphor and suggest that the poet-charioteer's challenge contains both aspects of driving: not just direction (metaphorically as *sens*), but also *speed*, concretely as the actual pace of the poem? Williams's driving poems continue this discussion while re-asserting the importance of pacing over stress or significance.⁵⁰ This is of a piece with what Hollander calls the "demythologizing" impulse in *Spring and All*. Williams's twentieth-century poet-driver has his hands on the wheel (*sens*) but also his foot on the pedals (*speed*).

⁵⁰ Within *Spring and All*, see especially poems XI ("The Right of Way," 205–6) and XVIII ("To Elsie," 217–19). Driving is a topos of Williams's poetry at least as early as "The Young Housewife" in *Poems 1916* (56).

***Phaedrus* Detour: Warner on Whitman, Temperance vs. Mania**

“Where sobriety leaves you, there is the measure of your enthusiasm”—Hölderlin

As I argue in the Conclusion of this dissertation, romantic and post-romantic thinkers have frequently mapped the dialectic of temperance and mania in *Phaedrus* onto the distinction between verse and prose, with prose aligned with temperance and sobriety and verse with mania, or the ability of forces external to the self to determine form and content. Michael Warner has taken a different tack from this line of thinking that stems from the German romantic tradition of thinking about sobriety in writing. In “Whitman Drunk,” the final essay in *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner fruitfully follows a more literal approach: examining the temperance movement of the 1840s and its effect on Whitman’s ideas for a wide-reaching public for his poetry (modeled on the temperance movement’s ability to enlist people across geographic and political boundaries that were fiercely policed in other arenas).

Though the parallelism is only implicit in Warner’s text, the platonic distinction between temperance and mania is repeated, as the opposition of sobriety to addiction, in what Warner terms “addiction literature.” Warner examines Whitman’s early temperance novel *Franklin Evans* to argue that Whitman uses the attraction-repulsion dialectic of the temperance narrative as a way of encoding the sexual expressivity of *Leaves of Grass*. Warner writes:

Something that cannot be openly avowed is nevertheless coming to expression [in the ‘cautionary tale’ of *Franklin Evans*]. Modern bourgeois culture gets a lot of things done this way, but nowhere more visibly than in the literature of addiction, to which *Franklin Evans* belongs. Addiction literature is marked by

a dialectic: no sooner do scenes of self-abandonment conjure up the necessity of self-mastery than this instrumental self-relation in turn gives way to the possibility of self-contemplation, of an abandonment newly regarded as expressive. (280–81)

Self-contemplation and the voluntarist rhetoric of reform movement (e.g., pledge signing) not only provide expression for un-airable desires, they also provide coherence, at the higher level, to the contradictory self caught between desire and addiction (figures as outside forces) and self-mastery. This dialectically-forged self, Warner argues, is a much better account of the “self” that would emerge in the later poetry than the purely positive, expansive self that is found in much traditional Whitman criticism.

Like *Franklin Evans*, *Leaves of Grass* imagines a stateless society, constituted in the public sphere through performative discourse. The significant difference is that the poetry imagines this associational style as yoked to—and explicated by—the contemplative or self-abandoning moment in the dialectic of individualism rather than its instrumental or self-mastering moment. Where *Franklin Evans* has imagined civil-society association as organized by voluntarism and self-mastery, Whitman in the 1850s and 1860s imagined non-state association as called into being by desire, by contemplative recognition, by the imperfect success of selfing. (283).

Dialectic is the correct term here because it is the negative pull or restraint of “mastery” and self-control that provides the momentum necessary to break its hold. The negative moment is turned productive. The restraint of temperance-moralizing

acts like a gravitational slingshot to launch Whitman's verse into a new, vaster space of freedom.

Warner's dialectic tracks very closely the opposition of temperance and mania in *Phaedrus*: the self is the stage of a conflict between desire, conceived of as an involuntary force from outside the self, and its restraint in self-mastery and sobriety. The contemplative self that negotiates between these two impulses and lends coherence to the internally divided complex of urges resembles Socrates' charioteer.

Since *Phaedrus*, we have also seen the peculiar alignment of this dialectic with opposition between poetry and prose. Socrates classes poetry with mania (poetic inspiration is the third type of "divine madness" in his subdivision), but as Warner's discussion makes clear, poetry by the time of Whitman occupies a more complex place in the dialectic. For "free verse" to be figured as a kind of liberation, traditional metrical verse must first be conceived of as constraining and sober. Whitman's free verse emerges not as anarchic, formless freedom, but a contemplative moment overseeing the conflict between manic inspiration and the sober *techné* of form.

For all of Whitman's derogation of "stock poetical devices" he never describes his poetry as a pure act of inspired spontaneity. The Williams of the *Improvisations* and other modernist experiments in automatic writing will go further toward this claim. Williams, not content with the late, third moment in the dialectic, still wants a poetry of the first: a poetry of pure spontaneous inspiration. Williams's insistence on immediacy (to the point of sacrificing the well-wrought-urn quality of some of his compositions), and the modernist break with form generally, exposes a fissure in the alignment of poetry/prose and temperance/mania. *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All* are

working through the cognitive dissonance of a poetry conceived of as manic and poetic form coded as both manic and sober. Williams's repeated insistence on the stressful circumstances and "great personal cost" to his mental condition as a result of writing these works is more than a biographical lament or a doctor's variation of modernist difficulty. To acknowledge the mental stress, even if the text retains traces of this breakdown, is to place a foot outside of the mania itself. Williams further muddies the traditional alignment by later associating his prose with a "disturbed mind" and the prose with "purity" (*IWW*, 36–37; see passage quoted at p. 33 above). On Warner's account, Whitman's free verse practices a self mastery that transcends the conflict between external law and pure self-abandonment. Williams's practice, by contrast, adopts the double voice of prosimetrum to put both temperance and mania on display, but because the identification of mode (verse/prose) with mood (temperance/mania) is ambiguous, the reader is put in the place of deciding where the alignment falls in any given instance.

V: What Verse Does, What Prose Does

In part one of this chapter, we examined some of the distinctions Williams proposes between verse (or sometimes poetry) and prose in *Spring and All*. Williams posits a sharp break between verse and prose, rejecting the possibility of a *tertium quid* such as "rhythmical prose" and dismissing as ridiculous the sliding-scale approach whereby "verse grades off into prose as the rhythm becomes less and less pronounced" (229). Williams's most repeated claims for the distinction appeal to a divergent source, purpose, or direction for verse (or poetry) and prose: poetry he aligns with the imagination, prose with either fact (219) or emotion (231). The strongest claim of all

appeals to a transformation *in kind* of the resultant composition based on whether it is determined to be verse or prose at origin. Given a text that is ambiguously verse or prose, Williams places the onus on the reader to determine whether it springs from a poetic or prosaic origin or intention. The same statement as prose results in a clear statement or communication (226); as poetry it results the creation of a new object, an addition to reality: “not ‘realism,’ but reality itself . . . not a matter of ‘representation’ . . . but of separate existence” (204). Such claims posit a perfect match or fit between the new composition and the reality it joins: an isomorphism of world and word. It has often gone unremarked that this seamless alignment of word and world—imagination and actuality—places Williams in a peculiar rhetorical camp: that of synecdoche. In *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of its Forms*, Mutlu Konuk Blasing proposes a generic schema of America poetry according to the four “master tropes”: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Synecdoche is sometimes difficult to distinguish from metonymy, since both rhetorical devices sometimes substitute part for whole or whole for part. Where metonymy proceeds by a one-way substitution of associated terms along a chain of adjacency, Blasing distinguishes synecdoche as positing a two-way exchangeability between part and whole (here, composition and reality).⁵¹ It “proposes a coincidence of textual and existential experience, figurative and literal language, poetic and natural form” (9). Blasing identifies a strain of American poets for whom synecdoche is the primary or structural trope, beginning with Whitman and extending to Williams and Pound (representing the modernist transformation of

⁵¹ Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987).

Whitman's project), and ultimately to Frank O'Hara (further re-shaping the trope for postmodern aims).⁵² These poets' shared structural trope, she argues, is to posit the equivalence of style and reality, word and world.

Williams's place in this "synecdochic" school entails certain rhetorical and epistemological commitments: his most famous statement of the position—"the world is not iambic"—is noteworthy because it makes a claim about the *world* in terms of the poetic, suggesting an equivalence and exchangeability of the one's explanatory power over the other. This goes quite a ways beyond the weaker but still extraordinary claim that the poetic is capable of perfectly representing reality. The stronger claim of equivalence extends in both directions—the hallmark of synecdoche as a two-way trope of equivalence. Blasing's account of the synecdochic school in American poetry paints a highly accurate picture of Williams's rhetoric—the plain-speaking, anti-rhetorical bias he shares with Whitman. But rather than exploring the philosophical implications of claiming such a perfect "fit" between poetic form and external reality, let's forge ahead with a description of what these poetic forms actually look like—the prose and verse of *Spring and All*—and how they function in the work.

Williams's verse is governed by enjambment above all else.⁵³ But because enjambment is pervasive and works outside the constraints of regular meter, it behaves somewhat differently from the familiar effect of anticipation and discovery:

⁵² Blasing, 1–14. Blasing also traces lineages based on the three remaining master tropes: an allegorical tradition beginning with Poe, a metaphoric tradition stemming from Emerson, and an ironic line originated by Dickinson.

⁵³ Cushman's book might just as easily be described as a monograph on enjambment as a single author study of Williams.

When enjambment is systematic, as in *Paradise Lost* or some of William Carlos Williams's free verse, a wide range of effects ensures that even strong, pointed cuts at line breaks will never startle by their mere occurrence but, if at all, for what they reveal: about language, about the world, or because of when and where, in the course of the poem, they show it.⁵⁴

To illustrate this point, Hollander gives his well known reading of poem XXII from *Spring and All* ("The Red Wheelbarrow"): splitting the compound words "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater" across the line divisions is "no surface trick," he writes: "Instead of Milton's shifting back and forth from original to derived meanings of words, Williams 'etymologizes' his compounds into their prior phenomena, and his verbal act represents, and *makes the reader carry out*, a meditative one" (111, emphasis added). But this word-splitting is not just in the eye: the spacing apart of the compound words results in a temporal extension and a change of pace, as the meditative act inaugurated by the enjambments makes clear. Hollander begins his famous essay on enjambment with Johnson's objection that blank verse "seems to be verse only to the eye," but quickly insists that enjambment is also an auditory effect. This is because the work of enjambment does not only occur at the line terminus, but also in the mid-line pauses (visual and auditory) that occur when the overflowing syntax comes to a rest in the following line(s) after an enjambment.⁵⁵ The question of

⁵⁴ John Hollander, "Sense Variouslly Drawn Out," in idem, *Vision and Resonance*, 110.

⁵⁵ This necessary pairing of an enjambed line-ending with a medial caesura following the *rejet* on the following line gives the lie to Agamben's provocative but ultimately sophistical claim that the last line of any poem must, by definition, be in prose because it does not contain the possibility of being enjambed. When enjambment is seen as a two-line phenomenon, it is clear enough that the final line of a poem *can* form part of an enjambment, namely the *rejet*. Who could argue that "derobé," the enjambed adjective that supposedly shocked Paris at the beginning of Hugo's *Hernani* (1830) is not part

where to put all the pauses is a crucial aspect of what establishes the meditative slowing-down in “The Red Wheelbarrow.” A pause is called for after the *rejets* “barrow” and “water” because they each complete an enjambed word or phrase from the previous line—but as single-word lines themselves, they also call for the conventional pause that occurs at the line ending. That the pause at the line terminus is often only implied or thought—a *pause pensée*—simply further entrenches the reading in which these pauses become not just temporal (in an actual reading) but figures of the meditative act. The lexical work of the etymologizing enjambments is of a piece with the pacing effect that orchestrates the meditative act the reader must carry out. And yet, the context from elsewhere in *Spring and All* suggests that this poem, too, might be an image captured at a fleeting glance through the windshield, not a sustained meditative gaze.⁵⁶ Part of what makes enjambment such an endlessly fascinating poetic technique is the contra-indicative relationship between its appearance and its rhetorical effect. As a figure of discontinuity and rupture, enjambment proceeds largely on the basis of continuity across line breaks. As a figure of continuity, enjambment calls attention to line breaks that threaten the orderly unfolding of syntax. The confusing effects of “pace,” which we have been sketching out also share this structure, as is evident in the confusion of glance vs. gaze (*glaze?*)

of the enjambment! (“Serait-ce déjà lui? C’est bien à l’escalier // Dérobé. Vite ouvrons. Bonjour beau cavalier.”) One might as easily argue that the initial line of every poem is prose because it cannot contain a *rejet*. Agamben also conveniently avoids mentioning that the French alexandrine can have intralineal enjambment if the syntax flows over the medial caesura without pausing.

⁵⁶ The poem is open enough to suggest both kinds of observers—the meditative farmer tending the chickens and the driver catching a glimpse of the scene while rolling past. To my mind, the most awkward interpretation is to place Williams on foot in someone else’s back yard staring meditatively at their wheelbarrow and chickens, but this is approach taken by Sergio Rizzo, “Remembering Race: Extra-poetical Contexts and the Racial Other in “The Red Wheelbarrow,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, No. 1 (Fall 2005): 34–54.

in this poem. Interpretation is built into the concept of enjambment—to have an “interesting” enjambment, there must be some ambiguity or element of surprise that hangs in the air until the line continues on to reveal, for example, rain /water rather than rain.

Pace, too, requires interpretation in order to proceed: as we have argued above, it is easy to conceive of arguments for why short-line poems might be thought of as “fast” and arguments for why they might be “slow.” Rather than appeal to some universal prosody, it seems more reasonable to follow the hints left by the poem to determine whether a particular passage might be fast- or slow-paced, and whether that sense of urgency (or relative calm) might be in tension with other tendencies of the poem or not. Williams, in working with a deliberately vague notion of pace, frontloads the need for interpretation on the part of the reader about such basic matters as fast/slow, fleeting glance/sustained meditation, walking/driving. Without at least an hypothesis about these aspects of the poem at the outset, any performance or silent reading of the poem will seem unsatisfying or “hard to quote convincingly,” as Williams says of Marianne Moore.

Prose, of course, does *not* have the possibility for enjambment, and yet, in the latter third or so of *Spring and All*, a strange enjambment-like phenomenon begins to creep up. Here and there, Williams’s prose sentences simply drop off, abandoning the syntax mid-stream. If enjambment is the continuation of syntax across a break, then this phenomenon is its obverse: breaking off the continuity of syntax in the (prose) context in which such breaks are not expected. It is difficult to find the proper rhetorical term for these moments. Anapodoton? Perhaps, but this figure technically

refers only to conditional sentences: if-statements that leave the then- portion unstated or implicit. Aposiopesis? A possibility, but this figure is also somewhat narrowly limited, in this case to a kind of trailing off that suggests the speaker is overcome with emotion or claiming a sentiment that is ineffable. As Henryk Baran and Albert W. Halsall write: “Pope defined aposiopesis as an “excellent figure for the ignorant, as ‘*What shall I say?*’ When one has nothing to say; or ‘*I can no more*’ when one really can no more: expressions which the gentle reader is so good as never to take in earnest” (*Peri bathous* [1727]).”⁵⁷ (PEPP, s.v. Aposiopesis). Williams appears to use this precise construction in the sentences beginning “I can say no more than” or “As far as I can discover” (231), but this is still too narrow.

Anacolouthon is the larger category containing these others—gathering together any species of interruption where the syntax “does not follow.”⁵⁸ The technique seems to arise most frequently when Williams is struggling (or playing at struggling) to define or articulate distinctions about his basic terms:

It is the presence of a

This is not “fit” but a unification of experience

⁵⁷ In Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993, s.v. “aposiopesis.”

⁵⁸ Very promising groundwork laid by Jan Mieszkowski, “Who’s Afraid of Anacolouthon?” *MLN* 124. 3 (2009; German Issue): 648–65. For a somewhat obscure rhetorical figure, anacolouthon suggests an interesting nexus of associations in literary criticism: De Man compares it to parabasis (Schlegel’s figure for romantic irony). And like parabasis, it is a latent possibility in any sentence. Hillis Miller uses it to describe the double-voicedness of lying in “The Anacolouthonic Lie.” Mieszkowski will link it also to Schiller, Holderlin, and Hegel’s speculative sentence. That speakers “self-correct” and break off syntax more frequently than linguists or literary critics care to admit leads Mieszkowski to suggest, overreachingly, that anacolouthon is constitutive of language and that it necessarily implies multiple voices or divided selves, and so demonstrates the fictionality of the integral speaking subject. Instead, a polyphonic language speaks through him.

[...]

The value of imagination to the writer consists in its ability to make words. Its unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence

This separates

Writing is not a searching about in the daily experience for apt similes and pretty thoughts and images. I have experienced that to my sorrow. It is not a conscious recording of the day's experiences "freshly and with the appearance of reality"—This sort of thing is serious to the development of any ability in a man, it fastens him down, makes him a—It destroys, makes nature an accessory to the particular theory he is following, it blinds him to his world,—
(206–7)

Part of what Williams is doing here is playing with structural ambiguity in the rhetorical devices: is breaking off an ellipsis, where the missing phrase is meant to be, so easily understood that it need not be spelled out further? Is the broken sentence working in the more restricted sense of aposiopesis—meant to suggest the ineffability of the thought, or that the speaker has been overcome by emotions? Are some of these trailing off statements meant to be conditional statements with an implicit consequence (anapodoton)? Much like an enjambment in verse, these breaks invite readers to propose our own solutions, effectively encouraging us to make Williams's incomplete argument whole for him, according to our own understanding of what he is driving at. But rather than the surprise of continuity on the following line, the prose-

based breaks suggest syntactical threads that are permanently dropped. Where Williams's verse escalates the use of enjambment to a constant presence in his prosody, the prose of *Spring and All* begins to raise the possibility that anacoluthon may be a more regular feature of language than we had previously thought (as confirmed, for instance, by listening to a sound recording of any casual conversation).⁵⁹ And yet, Williams's use of the fragment in this rhetorical setting always leaves open the possibility that we ought to be able to complete the thought. That is, instead of fully subscribing to the notion of a fragmentary modernity, Williams introduces the prose analogue of a line break, where the fragments are not necessarily unrecoverable, but may still be fully-intelligible features of reality as described by the poet. Whether in verse or in prose, these statements are meant to be understood, after all. Williams is no obscurantist: "If it is poetry it means this and only this—and if it is prose it means that and only that. Anything else is confusion, silly and bad practice" (230).

Visually, some of these sentence fragments start to look like little versicles: the beginnings of poems whose continuations have been omitted. Several of these fragments stand alone as paragraphs of their own: how could we distinguish them from verse, then? Perhaps they are unannounced, one-line poems. Of course, we can and do rule out this possibility (the poems are all numbered), but these fragmentary prose sentences serve as pop-quizzes to test whether we have been tracking the

⁵⁹ Following Mieszkowski in suggesting that this figure is a more regular feature of our everyday language use than we might have guessed; breaking off an ever-present possibility.

distinction between verse and prose that Williams is elaborating. Here is a small sample of anacolouthonic paragraphs:

So long as the sky is recognized as an association (187)

The farmer and the fisherman who read their own lives there have a practical corrective for (187)

The contradiction which is felt. (193)

I don't know what the Spanish see in their Velásquez and Goya but (198)

Cézanne—(198)

enlargement—revivification of values (204)

It is the presence of a (206)

This separates (207)

the cleavage is complete (219)

Pío Barjo interested me once—(220)

Anyhow the change of Baroja interested me (221)

The jump between facts and imaginative reality (221)

It is the imagination that—(225)

The practical point would be to discover—(231)

I think the conditions of music are objects for the action of the writer's imagination just as a table or—(235)

Still others drop off at the end of otherwise syntactically regular paragraphs:

In work such as Shakespeare's—(194)

Such work elucidates—(194)

To repeat physical experiences has no—(202)

To penetrate everywhere with enlightenment—(226)

Prose may follow to enlighten but poetry—(226)

But what is there to keep us from reading enjambment in verse *as* anacolouthon? In enjambment, we don't know until the next line whether the syntax will continue smoothly, drop off a cliff, switch gears to complete a different thought, or trail off rhetorically (but with an implicit conclusion). I think that Williams is teaching us to read his enjambments in this way: syntax and context are allowed to determine the ultimate effect, rather than a preconceived notion of what kinds of breaks are more disruptive than others. Williams's enjambments are not meant to be anxiety-producing in the way that the unfinished prose sentences can sometimes feel. On the whole, the poems of *Spring and All* are more syntactically regular than the prose—so enjambment becomes a device of syntactic continuity *across* interruptions, while anacolouthon in the prose becomes associated with discontinuity *resulting from* interruptions.

Anacolouthon also crucially points back to the importance of pace in all of the aspects we have been exploring. Leaving behind the traces of a hurried composition (jot it down and revise on the fly!) suggests a faster-paced prose. But all the durational pauses for these interrupting thoughts, set off with em dashes, have the effect of slowing the prose down (note also how many verse lines end with em dashes at 226–29). Once again it is difficult to say what the effect should be on the pacing of these passages. And if the reader cannot even decide whether the continuation of the thought is meant to be so obvious that it goes without saying (ellipsis), or so impossible to articulate that the sentence must fail (aposiopesis), we are faced once again with the

prospect that *Spring and All* might in fact be giving us bad directions about how to read it. Just as the poems paired high-speed observations with slow-paced language (and vice versa), the anacoluthonic moments in the prose pair the self-assured notion that the completed thought is obvious, with the doubtful and humble concern that the project might not be possible to pull off after all.

I have been arguing that this structural contradiction of pacing is *the* prosodic project of *Spring and All*. When the rhetorical pace of the work seems “fast”—while Williams is driving a car, glimpsing, and jotting hurriedly—the phenomenological (or durational) pace inevitably contradicts it, slowing the reading of the poem down with enjambments, thought-pauses, and other retarding devices. When the rhetoric is genuinely meditative and plodding, Williams eases off the prosodic breaks, speeding up the time of the reading experience. Short lined poems that seem spaced out and elongated—slow-paced—compared to how they might read when formatted as prose, come off as quick when measured against the page as a temporal unit. Williams erects rigid distinctions between verse and prose that are based in part on his understanding of rhythm (as described in part one of this chapter), but then reveals contradictory rhythmic impulses within each mode. This does not blur the boundaries between lined and unlined writing but, quite the contrary, it asks the reader to enact his common-sense ideas about how prose or verse is supposed to behave in order to settle the interpretive ambiguities about pace and continuity. Williams will not raise the possibility of a communicative failure without also allowing for the possibility for an implicit conclusion that is obvious to everyone, as in the answer to a rhetorical question.

Is what I have written prose? The only answer is that form in prose ends with the end of that which is being communicated—If the power to go on falters in the middle of a sentence—that is the end of that sentence—Or if a new phase enters at that point it is only stupidity to go on. There is no confusion—only difficulties. (226)

Likewise in the poems, Williams will not allow his radical enjambments to break lines and words into smaller and smaller fragments without leaving open the possibility that these breaks might reveal an underlying continuity and etymological coherence to a poem that only appears fragmentary on the surface. The deliberately vague rhythmic techniques of pace do much the same thing throughout *Spring and All*: they raise, but do not settle, the question of how we read, experience, and lend our attention to different kinds of writing. It seems reasonable to expect that a work of prosimetrum, alternating between verse and prose, would lead to firm conclusions about the difference between the two formats, but the more lasting effect of this work is to put pressure on the different, sometimes contradictory, aspects of pace *within* each mode. Williams enacts these pushmi-pullyu rhythmic structures as part of a dense meditation on the internal contradictions of a deliberately vague prosody of pace that relies neither on quantity nor stress, but the ebb and flow of readerly attention against the duration and felt pacing of the experience of reading.

CHAPTER 3

The Curious Case of Stein's Tender Buttons

"By this I mean this"¹

Of Visitors—the fairest—
For Occupation—This—
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise—²

Down with the Noun

Gertrude Stein's writing style is likely the most easily recognized and readily parodied of any modernist author. Moreover, Stein's signature sentence construction remains consistent across works of varying length, genre, and period, to the point that the major critical division in her writings is not one of genre, but of style—the so-called audience writing as distinct from her more experimental works. Genre, then, is a relatively weak force in Stein's writing. The common association of prose poetry with freedom, bond-breaking, genre-smashing, tradition-bucking, and radical transformation of all stripes is an easy one to make in this context, especially given how genuinely strange the poems are, but the prose poems of Stein's *Tender Buttons* may not have such an actively oppositional relationship to tradition, genre, and the rest. Stein is largely unconcerned with micro-distinctions of kind within poetry, and her use of prose poetry may signal something more like a benign neglect of versification *and* its discontents—not a *crise de vers* so much as a "*meh*" *de vers*. Rolling one's eyes at the question is not the same as smashing the idols of poetry in

¹ "Composition as Explanation," in Gertrude Stein, *Selected Writings*, 513.

² Emily Dickinson, "I Dwell in Possibility," (Johnson 657). Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown, 1961).

verse.³ Prose poetry, as a form, allows for such a range of intensity in part because prose poetry is *about* a slackening of formal power in a context where there is still an expectation that the focus is on the message for its own sake, the *how* rather than *what* is said.⁴ The less pushy the form is, the easier it is to take a back seat to other concerns.

This chapter is about how this slackening occurs and how such a “weak” form operates. In other chapters, I have described formal practices associated with poetic prose as “subtractive” and “deliberately vague”; prose poetry too operates on this negative plane—its formal function is that of creating a power vacuum where a more assertive formal practice might have imposed itself. Both Riding and Williams articulated essentialist views of the difference between poetry and prose, and they played the two modes against one another as a way of renegotiating the relationship of each to the presentation of facts, accurate description, musicality in language, imagination, novelty, the pace of observation, and the status of everyday language.

Stein too wrote extensively on the difference between poetry and prose, but without the complex evaluative dimension of Riding or Williams and in terms that are more comparative than essentialist. Her own comments on a major division like poetry vs. prose rely on a few very broad distinctions: novels are long (sometimes very long) where poems are short; novels deal with people and the passage of time, whereas it is

³ Though it must be said that, for Stein, it is not at all axiomatic that boredom is necessarily counter-revolutionary. Truancy is not an intervention, but both can be oppositional.

⁴ Per Jakobson, in the poetic function of language the focus is on the message for its own sake. “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination,” Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (New York: Wiley, 1960), 358. Steinian repetition would seem to maximize this projection of equivalence into the axis of combination.

easier to capture a static object in a brief poem.⁵ (Stein's word-portraits of Picasso, Matisse, and others, exist somewhere in between both in length and scope of attention—usually a single person, with reference to a single sitting.) Even Stein's famous distinctions between poetry and prose in "Poetry and Grammar" first emerges from a difference in length. Here she describes shifting from *The Making of Americans* to *Tender Buttons*:

But and after I had gone as far as I could in these long sentences and paragraphs that had come to do something else I then began very short things and in doing very short things I resolutely realized nouns and decided not to get around them but to meet them, to handle in short to refuse them by using them and in that way my real acquaintance with poetry was begun. (*Lectures in America*, 228)

Having avoided nouns to focus on verbs in *The Making of Americans*, Stein reports finding herself confronted by nouns when moving from "long sentences and paragraphs" to "very short things."⁶ At this point she concludes that poems—as very short things—are essentially caught up with nouns and naming, resulting in perhaps her best-known formulation of the difference between poetry and prose:

⁵ I have in mind a statement from "Portraits and Repetition": "so concentrating on looking I did the *Tender Buttons* because it was easier to do objects than people if you were just looking." Stein, *Lectures in America* (New York: Random House, 1935), 198–99. See also the passage beginning "The trouble with including looking" (188–89).

⁶ The claim that nouns are uninteresting is one of the first moves of the lecture: "generally speaking, things once they are named the name does not go on doing anything to them so why write in nouns. Nouns are the names of anything and just naming names is alright when you want to call a roll but is it good for anything else" (210). Adjectives are even less interesting because they are tied to nouns, but: "verbs and adverbs are more interesting. In the first place they have one very nice quality and that is that they can be so mistaken. It is wonderful the number of mistakes a verb can make and that is equally true of its adverb" (211).

[Poetry] is a vocabulary entirely based on the noun as prose is essentially and determinately and vigorously not based on the noun. Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. It is doing that always doing that, doing that and doing nothing but that. Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns. That is what poetry does, that is what poetry has to do no matter what kind of poetry it is. And there are a great many kinds of poetry. (231)

That there are “a great many kinds of poetry” merits mention, but not exploration, in this schema. That her experiments with names and naming result in poetry is described as merely accidental: “I called [things] by their names with passion and that made poetry, I did not mean it to make poetry but it did, it made the *Tender Buttons*, and the *Tender Buttons* was very good poetry it made a lot more poetry” (235). If there is any tension between the accidental poetry of *Tender Buttons* and its prose format, Stein does not mention it. She does not seem to be thinking that deeply about it: the joke here lies in Stein’s happy discovery that she has been writing poetry without even trying, a hilarious inversion of M. Jourdain’s pleasure at learning that he had been speaking in prose all his life in Molière’s *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. It is tempting to make this inversion more programmatic: is Stein arguing that noun-obsessed poetry, not prose, is the default mode of language, and that her approach to prose constitutes a radical re-shaping of language rather than a return to a default ideal of ordinary, straightforward speech? This fits a bit too neatly with my thesis.

Stein's view of poetry as the passionate caress of the noun is not the end of the story in this lecture: she begins to question whether she can dispense with nouns in poetry as she had in prose (236) and reports: "I commenced trying to do something in *Tender Buttons* about this thing" (236). Note the shifting ground of Stein's description of the project of *Tender Buttons*: what was first the demonstration of a firm conclusion—"that is what poetry does, that is what poetry has to do" (231)—has now become a question to be explored: what if poetry too could avoid the noun and focus on more interesting parts of speech?

By the end of Stein's "Poetry and Grammar," she has become firmly convinced that this is possible, resulting in yet another re-description of *Tender Buttons*, this time as a work aimed at the expulsion of nouns from poetry: "And so in *Tender Buttons* and then on and on I struggled with the ridding myself of nouns, I knew nouns must go in poetry as they had gone in prose if anything that is everything was to go on meaning something" (242). In Stein's account from the 1930s, the aim of *Tender Buttons* shifted over time, and yet a somewhat stable picture emerges of a project concerned with description, strictly in the present tense,⁷ and bearing some relation to naming via cultivating, questioning, or avoiding the noun.

Reference, Definition, Negation, Noise

The coordinates of Stein's formal categories are a broad-brush affair—poetry and prose; long sentences and very short things; caressing nouns and struggling to be rid of them. The descriptions in *Lectures in America*, though written twenty years after

⁷ *Lectures in America*, 176–82; 188–89.

Tender Buttons, have become touchstones in the criticism, and are virtually obligatory to quote. To this we must add several more claims that have become critical commonplaces about *Tender Buttons*.⁸

- The presence of encoded reference to biographical events in Stein's life between 1909 and 1913, which saw the cementing of her relationship with Alice and a definitive break with her brother Leo.
- The importance of puns and etymologies, both as part of the soundscape of the poems and as a way of disentangling knotty passages that would otherwise be unintelligible.
- That the verbal descriptions practice a kind of literary cubism, either through multi-perspectivalism (shifting subject positions) or through the fracturing and re-combination of syntax.⁹
- Thematic readings extending from the kinds of objects Stein treats in the poems. For instance, the first poem in *Objects*, "A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass," leads to readings about other containers, boxes, and vessels in the work, and extends to the thematic importance of containment, and passages that blur or reinforce the opposition of inside/outside.
- Readings that situate Stein in terms of modernism and postmodernism.

⁸ Sarah Ford's book gives a patient outline of many of these trends; Sara J. Ford, *Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern Consciousness* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁹ See Dubnick, Perloff, and Walker for readings that trace a development from earlier analytic cubism to later synthetic cubism in Stein's writing that is contemporary with the same transition in Picasso, Braque, and Gris around 1912. SFMoMA's exhibition *The Stein's Collect* (2011) shows that Stein was literally *invested* in this transition, having bought many paintings by each of these artists throughout the period. See also Kenneth Rexroth's introduction to his translations of Pierre Reverdy, "The Cubist Poetry of Pierre Reverdy," in Kenneth Rexroth, *World Outside the Window* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 252–58.

In terms of form and genre, most readers accept Stein's grammatical schema or treat *Tender Buttons* as *sui generis*, even with respect to the genre of prose poetry.¹⁰ It has been difficult to discuss what kind of thing *Tender Buttons* is and what kind of work its form might be exercising without first having a better grasp of how to read the text in the first place. Above all, it must be said that *Tender Buttons* is fun, funny, and a joy to listen to, while at the same time being difficult, obscure, and occasionally frustrating. Pamela Hadas ends her 1978 essay on *Tender Buttons* with a frank admission of its interpretive difficulties:

In Food, "Roastbeef" we find, "What is certainly the desertion is not a reduced description, a description is not a birthday." With a work such as *Tender Buttons* it is always tempting to desert the text and describe something less, or more lucid. [. . .] Thus, wherever, the text is quoted in illustration of my reduced description, suggestions toward more meanings than can be succinctly and immediately dealt with will present themselves. It is this quality in *Tender Buttons* which, if we have a certain curiosity, invites us to try again, try to read our own fortunes and misfortunes into the accidents of surface as one reads clouds, tea leaves, dreams, a Jackson Pollock painting, or the lines that hieroglyph an old poet's face.¹¹

¹⁰ Stephen Fredman finds in Stein the inverse of his term "poet's prose," and this places her outside the scope of his study: "[Stein] is primarily a prose writer who expands the possibilities for meaning in her sentences by adopting poetry devices like meter, rhyme, puns, and foregrounding; she is the inverse of the poets who use the prose sentence as a way to extend the possibilities of meaning in their poetry. Only from the perspective of the nongeneric writers [such as Antin and Silliman] does that distinction cease to hold" Fredman, *Poet's Prose*, 2nd ed., 168n15. As discussed in chapter one and elsewhere, I have a longstanding quarrel with the term "nongeneric."

¹¹ Pamela Hadas, "Spreading the Difference: One Way to Read Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 24:1 (1978): 74–75n18.

Hadas's concern over having too many meanings—more than can be easily dealt with—may be one result of the slackening of form discussed at the opening of this chapter. Stein's prose, even in the way she explains it in the *Lectures*, generally does not engage in reinforcing one meaning over another; it declines to offer shape. Hadas finds so many "accidents of surface" because it is a deliberately slippery surface. Despite these difficulties, her essay presents a forceful reading *Tender Buttons* as a highly encrypted narration and working through of a tumultuous time in Stein's life—the period from roughly 1909, when Alice moved in to 27 rue de Fleurus, to 1913, when Leo Stein left the household. The change was definitive: Gertrude and Leo divided their jointly-owned paintings, and hardly spoke again, while Gertrude and Alice would spend the next three decades together. Since Hadas's essay, critics have supplemented or revised the biographical reading of *Tender Buttons* along similar lines—that the objects, food, and rooms bear a direct and occasionally discoverable relation to actual objects, food, and rooms in the Stein household during the time of its composition. Perhaps because the text is otherwise so oblique, this small subset of possible referents becomes an irresistible lure. What is remarkable, though, in much of this biographically-oriented criticism is the jump from a highly uncertain text to maximum specificity in the interpretation, as in the "decoding" of specific words in the Stein lexicon to reveal concealed biographical insights. Most famously, critics have decoded Stein's use of the word "cow" to refer to an orgasm in a private language she shared with Toklas. "Cows" appear in *Tender Buttons*, but occur even more in slightly later poems and writings:¹²

¹² Compare with the use of "Caesar" (and passing use of "cow" in the long erotic poem "Lifting Belly,"

Have it as having having it as happening, happening to have it as having,
having to have it as happening . . . and my wife has a cow as now, my wife
having a cow as now, my wife having a cow as now and having a cow . . . and
having a cow now (*A Book Concluding With As A Wife Has A Cow A Love
Story* [1923])¹³

I was overcome with remorse. It was my fault that my wife did not have a cow.
This sentence they cannot use. (*How to Write* [1931])¹⁴

I hope she has her cow. Bidding a wedding, widening received treading, little
leading mention nothing. [. . .] Please could, please could, jam it not plus
more sit in when. (“A Little Called Pauline,” *Tender Buttons*, 15)¹⁵

A blaze, a search in between, a cow, only any wet place, only this tune. [. . .]
A canoe is orderly. A Period is solemn. A cow is accepted. (“Sugar,” *Tender
Buttons*, 29)

Ulla Dydo has extended this interpretation in even greater detail based on evidence
found in love letters Stein wrote to Toklas and notes in Stein’s notebooks. Dydo
surveys all of the instances and permutations of cow—to have a cow, to give or accept

in Stein, *Bee Time Vine and Other Pieces [1913–1927]* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1953), 61–115.

¹³ Ulla E. Dydo, ed., *A Stein Reader* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1993), 462.

¹⁴ Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (West Glover, VT: Something Else Press, 1973). Originally published in France, 1931.

¹⁵ Page references to *Tender Buttons* throughout this chapter are from Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997). I have checked all quotations for accuracy against the Green Integer edition (Los Angeles, 2002), which is a photocopy/facsimile of the 1914 Claire Marie edition, but I haven’t changed the page references to show the Green Integer pagination.

a cow, and even the verb form *to cow*—and arrives at a conclusion about Stein and Toklas’s sex life. She reports that only Toklas experienced cows, Stein’s pleasure was in the giving (she brags of being the “best cow giver in all the world”); beyond that, she channeled her own pleasure and desires into her writing. Dydo writes, “Toklas’s sexual fulfillment inspires Stein to write, which in turn represents sexual fulfillment [‘babies’ in the letters] for herself.”¹⁶

And yet, such well-researched referential identifications can be challenged. Kay Turner’s reading of the same love notes results in quite a different interpretation, just as frankly corporeal but decidedly more prosaic and less aligned with the critical interest in Stein and Toklas’s sexuality:

For years feminists and lesbians, scholars and admirers—including me—have claimed cows as Stein’s code for lovemaking, or more specifically for Toklas’s orgasms [. . .] The most startling revelation in the [love] notes comes from what may be for some a more troubling realm, the scatological . . . More than a third of the notes demonstrate unequivocally that “cows” are Toklas’s feces or stools, as Stein defines them in one example: “And / what is a stool. That was / an elegant name for a cow.”¹⁷

Below are two of the passages that Turner counts as unequivocal evidence that “the loving command for a ‘cow’ from Alice is the command for a bowel movement”:

¹⁶ Ulla E. Dydo with William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises 1923–1934* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2003), 28.

¹⁷ Kay Turner, ed. *Baby Precious Always Shines: Selected Love Notes Between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas* (New York, St. Martins, 1999), 25.

. . . I love my
Wifey so completely oh so completely,
And, she is to have a lovely cow, a real
cow splash goes the cow now, splash
splash splash. Lovely baby smelly cow comes
out of baby anyhow now, . . .

When this you see sweetly and slowly out
from she will splash from her little behind
just nicely plop into the water . . .
out comes a cow¹⁸

Turner speculates that Toklas may have suffered from a digestive disorder, and Stein's attentiveness to her "sweet smelly cows" were part of a quasi-medical regimen—often suggesting inducements such as tea, mineral water, and cigarettes, along the lines of the various "water cures" promoted at spas in the nineteenth century.¹⁹ (Turner refers to a "cult of regularity" craze in early twentieth-century Europe.) Rather than a psychosexual obsession with stool, Stein's entreaties would have been an expression of concern for her partner's health and comfort. And if this concern did overlap in strange ways with other aspects of Stein and Toklas's relationship (the baby talk patter), or with Stein's artistic practice, she would not have been entirely alone. Swift had long ago connected various bodily effluents with scriblers' ink in *A Tale of a Tub*

¹⁸ Quoted in Turner, *Baby Precious Always Shines*, 26.

¹⁹ Turner, 26–36.

and *The Battle of the Books* (both 1704),²⁰ and among Stein's friends and acquaintances, the rhetorical *topos* of Dada is made up of a similar blend of baby talk, bodily functions, sexuality, and the avant-garde.²¹

Though Turner's selections of the Stein-Toklas letters was published in 1999, Dydo did not revise or qualify her conclusions about the significance of "cows" (first published in the 80s and 90s) in her 2003 book. Janet Malcolm's recent biography repeats Dydo's conclusion, but is equally reluctant to report Turner's reading.²² I find the hypothetical intestinal distress slightly more plausible than Dydo's hypothesis that Stein's writing completely displaces physical reciprocity in the couple's sexual relationship. (Then again, letters from Toklas to Stein are comparatively rare, so perhaps there is a gap in the archive.) Both readings seem more than a bit voyeuristic, and it is unsettling that there could be such an open disagreement about whether "cow" is a window onto the bedroom or the toilet—whether this aspect of Stein and Toklas's private language involved pleasure or chronic discomfort. It is a dismaying fact—casting doubt on the infallibility of the archive to settle textual disputes of this kind, even in the case of an archive as extensive as Stein's and for a scholar like Dydo

²⁰ For a recent discussion of effluents as a figure for ink in Swift, see the chapter "Me and My Ink," in Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011), 175–200.

²¹ Stein scholars tend to be careful in keeping Dada at arm's length since Stein was not committed to nonsense. Quite to the contrary, she consistently describes her goals in terms of realism. But compare Hans Arp and El Lissitzky, from "Isms in Art": "Dadaïsm has assailed fine-arts. He declared art to be a magic purge[,] gave the clyster to Venus of Milo, and allowed "Laocoon & Sons" to absent themselves at last after they had tortured themselves in the millennial fight with the rattlesnake. Dadaïsm has carried affirmation and negation up to nonsens [sic]. In order to come to the indifference, dadaïsm has been destructive." Hans Arp and El Lissitzky, *Die Kunstisten: Les ismes de l'art: The isms of art* (Munich, 1925; reprint Rolandseck, Germany: Müller, 1990), 10. The paragraph is attributed to Arp.

²² Janet Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), 227n6. If it is not simply an oversight, then I begrudgingly admit that the stubborn persistence of the sexier reading seems to confirm Terry Eagleton's charge, in *After Theory* (2003), that cultural theory is happy to study healthy, desiring bodies in pursuit of pleasure, but still squeamish about bodies that grow sick, famished, or broken by labor.

who has spent decades of time with the materials. Even under ideal circumstances, then, there is a wide margin of error involved in attempting to pin down a direct correspondence between the language of *Tender Buttons* (or Stein's work in general) and historical data of the author's biography. Pamela Hadas's remark that it is "always tempting to desert the text and describe something less, or more lucid" seems to hover over much of Stein criticism.

Marianne DeKoven has argued that the reduction to a coherent, unitary meaning goes against the spirit of Stein's work, which is committed to indeterminacy and play—an expression of *jouissance* (and actively opposed to determinate meaning, understood by DeKoven to be patriarchal).²³ Marguerite Murphy offers a defense of referential interpretations, however, noting that interpretive difficulties do not authorize readers simply to give up trying to forge understanding: "to abjure all 'readings' or 'decodings,' however partial, is to render Stein silent after one has simply overheard her textual '*jouissance*' . . . we do Stein an injustice if we ignore what she may have to say, or deny that she has anything to say."²⁴ I am sympathetic to both positions, and would argue that the text seems most playful and subversive when its undecidable aspects are pitched against decodings at their most crudely referential—in moments when it undermines identifications that *seem* solid and stable, as in the case of "cows," where a critical consensus is dramatically upended.²⁵

²³ Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin P, 1983). See also her reassessment of this work (and other Stein criticism) in the introduction to a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on Stein: "Introduction: Transformations of Gertrude Stein" *Modern Fiction Studies* 42.3 (1996) 469–83.

²⁴ Marguerite Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion*, 139.

²⁵ Each critical position needs the other: there can be no subversion without a version, and no corrective reading without an erroneous one.

Still, it makes sense to temper the referential aspect of the text with readings based on other aspects of Stein's language. Without committing to the specific referentiality of either reading of "cow," it can be observed that both proceed from idiomatic phrases involving the word *cow*: Dydo from "having a cow" and Turner from "cow patties," "cow pies," and the elocutionary exercise "how now brown cow." Other passages from *Tender Buttons* also seem to derive from well worn-phrases, as in "a piece of coffee is not a detainer" ("A Piece of Coffee," 5), which perhaps re-writes or responds to a polite request:

"Won't you stay for a cup of coffee?"

"Only if it's not any trouble."

"Oh no, it's no trouble at all."

Staying for coffee becomes nominalized—a detainer—except that, no, it is *not* a detainer in Stein's definition, perhaps because the invitation is so rarely declined. Who doesn't have time for a cup of coffee? It is unclear whether Stein sought to evoke or avoid the thought of such an exchange in disguising it in this way—imagining this mini-narrative can draw us out of the poem—but the persistent negative constructions of the polite back-and-forth add a gentler tone to the negative structures elsewhere in *Tender Buttons*. *No*, *not any*, and *not at all* begin to sound less like gnomic pronouncements, and more like the habitual reassurances of polite discourse.

But maybe that scenario doesn't quite get it right. Why is it a "piece" of coffee, anyway? It sounds so strange. Perhaps the poem's title is not a coded message but a somewhat mangled bilingual pun: a *pause-café* (coffee-break) is not a detainer? Or

better, a *pousse-café* is not a detainer. The *pousse-café*, a multi-layered digestif taken after coffee, begins to come into view in the poem:

A single image is not splendor. Dirty is yellow. A sign of more in not mentioned. A piece of coffee is not a detainer. The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter. The clean mixture is whiter and not coal color, never more coal color than altogether. (5)

The *pousse-café* has the characteristics of the ideal Steinian description. For starters, it is not actually coffee; the “café” in its name means something else without naming it. A “pousse” is not a detainer but a push or a “chaser.” Furthermore, the multilayered drink gives Stein an opportunity to evoke colors, which is tricky to do without using their names. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following recipe from Jerry Thomas’s *How to Mix Drinks; Or, The Bon-Vivant’s Companion* (1862):²⁶

Parisian Pousse Café

(Use small wineglass.)

2/ 5 Curaçoa

2/ 5 Kirschwasser

1/ 5 Chartreuse

This is a celebrated Parisian drink.

Color is a particular concern throughout *Tender Buttons*, and this poem announces that this piece of coffee is not monochromatic and uniform (“a single image is not

²⁶ Jerry Thomas, *How to Mix Drinks; Or, The Bon-Vivant’s Companion* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald: 1862), 65. This book is generally considered to be the first to record and publish cocktail recipes. See also Eric Felten, “Neither Shaken Nor Stirred,” *Wall Street Journal* 16 September 2006, P9; <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB115835765770164823.html>. Felten reports that the standard *pousse-café* had six layers, and that the largest wave of enthusiasm for the *pousse-café* peaked in the 1890s.

splendor”). Yellow here can come from chartreuse, but many recipes also call for some kind of cream, hence “the resemblance to yellow is dirtier [in the sense of opaque: crème?] and distincter [clearer: chartreuse?].” Stein also describes the quality of the color when the layers remain clean and separated, “the clean mixture is whiter and not coal color” (that is, not the color of black coffee), and the muddy result if they become mixed: “never more coal color than altogether.” The subsequent paragraphs become difficult to gloss so explicitly, but perhaps they take the reader through the experience of the drink layer by layer, ending up drunk and gregarious before breaking off suddenly: “It has that shape nicely. Very nicely may not be exaggerating. Very strongly may be sincerely fainting. Maybe strangely flattering. May not be strange in everything. May not be strange to” (5).

Many poems elsewhere in *Tender Buttons* seem to suggest cross-linguistic punning, part-whole relationships, or transformed polite chatter, but even less conclusively than “A Piece of Coffee.” Take, for example, the first and probably most commented-upon poem from the collection (nearly every essay on *Tender Buttons* has offered a reading of it):²⁷

²⁷ A complete bibliography of *Tender Buttons* criticism could be mentioned here, but I especially recall Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), in the final pages of her first of “Two Stein Talks,” 99–105. Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), 194–98; Ford, *Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens*, 54–56; Jayne L. Walker, *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from Three Lives to Tender Buttons* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 145. An expansive combination of deep etymologies, Buddhist philosophy (*Tender Buttons* as mandala) and psychoanalysis in Allegra Stewart, *Gertrude Stein and the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), 87–119; a combination of cubism, alchemy, and Christian theology informs Bettina Knapp, *Gertrude Stein* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 116–120; William Gass, “Gertrude Stein and the Geography of the Sentence,” *The World Within the Word* (New York: Basic, 1978), 63–123; Marjorie Perloff, *21st Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 63–76; Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981); for a very fine discussion, see Harriet Scott Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialog in Gertrude Stein* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989), 92–95;

A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color
and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not
unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (3)

Unlike many of the subsequent poems, the title is more than a simple noun or noun phrase; it sets up its own structure of equivalence within the title itself. Unsure how to proceed, it seems prudent to speculate on the nature of a carafe—bigger than a tumbler, smaller than a pitcher—and glass in general, as well as what a blind glass might be. It is easy to get stuck in the title, though, and it is unclear whether this could be a warning, or a friendly hint for how to proceed in later poems. To summarize the possibilities—actually quite varied, and always interesting—that others have entertained just concerning the title of the first poem leads deep into the weeds. There is a refrain-like motion in Stein criticism in which the reader begins to follow the grammatical structure that is the dominate mode of *Tender Buttons*: the copula. Everything looks like a definition, even though it might not sound like one or make sense in that way. “A carafe is . . . ;” “A box is. . . .” For all the wordplay, punning, and lush sounds of *Tender Buttons*, these repeated syntactic structures of assertion may be its chief species of rhyme, though they are much more difficult to hear. This is fine as far as it goes—Stein did nothing to dissuade readers from treating the relationship of title to poem as one of definition or word-portrait. In fact, another

and the very early Michael J. Hoffman, *The Development of Abstractionism in the Writings of Gertrude Stein* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 183–84.

passage from “Poetry and Grammar” where Stein describes her aims in writing *Tender Buttons* sounds like a definition of “definition”:

Was there not a way of naming things that would not invent names, but mean names without naming them.

I had always been very impressed from the time that I was very young by having had it told me and then afterwards feeling it myself that Shakespeare in the forest of Arden had created a forest without mentioning the things that make a forest. You feel it all but he does not name the names.

Now that was a thing that I too felt in me the need of making it be a thing that could be named without using its name. After all one had known its name anything’s name for so long, and so the name was not new but the thing being alive was always new.

What was there to do.

I commenced trying to do something in *Tender Buttons* about this thing.²⁸

How helpful is the reference to Arden meant to be? Stein doesn’t care to specify *which* forest or *what kind* of forest. Arden is the name of many things: a forest in Warwickshire; a forest in France (Ardennes, where *Rosalynde* was set); the maiden name of Shakespeare’s mother;²⁹ a potential portmanteau pun on *Arcadia* and *Eden*. *Et in Arden ego*. *Garden of Arden*. Each of these is a potential *reference* for Arden, but in

²⁸ Gertrude Stein, “Poetry and Grammar,” 236–37.

²⁹ *As You Like It*, Yale Shakespeare, rev. ed (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954), 105n114.

the passage above Stein emphasizes the overall *feeling*.³⁰ She seems content with the general category “forest,” and relatively uninterested in a more specific reference. Using a specific name (Arden) to produce the feeling of a general category (forest) is not quite the same as a definition. In some ways it is going in the opposite direction—from specific to general—where a definition might specify a term’s relationship to both more precise and more general terms, or some other relationship entirely.

This interplay of levels, in descriptions or in definitions, is one of the key problems that Stein’s text explores. To the extent that this can be thought of as a formal problem, Stein’s prose poems decline to arrange or structure the elements, not sonically as rhyme or figuratively as metaphor (as they might in verse), or hierarchically (as in discursive prose). On the level of grammar we notice one facet of the problem: at the same time that the copula expresses a relationship of extreme similarity—at times to the point of redundancy—the “is” is also self-effacing. It is the simplest syntactic relationship English grammar has and often fades into the background. While it is easy, then, to slip past (or slip into) Stein’s use of the copula, it is useful to keep in mind just how frequently twentieth-century free verse omits or elides the “is” (not to mention Stein’s other favorites, articles, conjunctions, and prepositions), preferring the structures of apposition afforded by the comma, the em-dash, or the colon, as in Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro.”³¹

³⁰ Perhaps *Gestalt* is appropriate, given her background in psychology.

³¹ Following the *Poetry* (1913) version, printed in *Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 251. The version in *Lustra*, which has a semicolon, is located at p. 111.

For Stein, the significance of “Arden” points in the opposite direction of the referential or biographical readings: away from specificity and toward a general category or an adjacent term. In the case of puns and etymologies, logical steps become leaps based on resemblance.³² Here, too, is another way in which naming a thing while avoiding its name evokes adjacent terms that do not necessarily fit into perfectly nested classifications arranged from general to specific. In working backwards from the specific object, *carafe*, and its etymological cousins to the more general category that could encompass the group—“containers,” let’s say—most readers will go on to observe the prevalence of other containers (a box, several kinds of drinking glasses, and so on), a thematic of “containment” in the poems, and, in light of the major section “Rooms,” a meditation on inside/outside throughout the work.

Despite Joshua Schuster’s objection that this first poem should not be treated as titular for the entire volume (given that “Objects” may not have come first in Stein’s plan for the book), I find this line of reasoning, from specific to general, persuasive.³³ Perhaps the container theme is merely inevitable in a book of interiors; if I look around my apartment, I see any number of containers and holders: a bookshelf, desk drawers, a coffee cup, a guitar case. I don’t find these objects threatening,

³² “Rooting around” is William Gass’s pun for the etymological approach to reading *Tender Buttons*. The high point of this mode may have been Allegra Stewart’s *Gertrude Stein and the Present* (1967), which traces several etymological roots back to Sanskrit or even Indo-European, and many since have followed her lead in tracing “*carafe*” to any number of Romance, Persian, or Arabic roots referring to containers of one form or another. Jonathan Culler remarks, in the introduction to *On Puns*, “etymologies, we might say, give us respectable puns, endowing pun-like effects with the authority of science and even of truth, as when we say that *education* means ‘to lead out’ (*e-ducere*).” Culler “The Call of the Phoneme,” in idem ed., *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (London: Blackwell, 1988).

³³ Schuster in *Jacket 2*. He complains that the final sentence of the poem—“the difference is spreading”—is frequently taught as a “flagship statement” for the work, whereas the opening of the “Rooms” section would seem to reject such hierarchy: “Act so that there is no use in a centre” (*Tender Buttons*, 43; Schuster, [online, no pagination]).

though, as the reach for “containment” suggests, nor do I think of every container as a place of concealment, of hiding a secret (though this is the drift that many of the biographical readings will follow). The word-paintings in *Tender Buttons* are not *en plein air*, nor is the dining *al fresco*, but it does not necessarily follow that they are confined, claustrophobic, battened down, or buttoned up.

Some of this mistrust of containers stems from the Cold War context of the first several decades of serious Stein scholarship.³⁴ There is not much to love about geopolitical containment or oppressive domestic interiors (attics, closets, kitchens). But if “A Carafe” indicates a thematic interest in containers in general, then a pun on *form* as container is also on the table. Perhaps then the opening poem also introduces a meditation on its form: the prose poem. And what better description of prose, as the supposedly transparent medium of language in which formal shaping does not apply, than as a “blind glass”: transparent, yes, but also blind to the fact that it is nevertheless still a form, a container that gives shape to its contents. The carafe is opposed to a kind of glass that is *not* transparent and *not* blind—neither mirror nor lamp. Stein may be looking for a sense of form that is none of the above: not reflective, self-reflexive, illuminating, or expressive. As a truly generic container, the carafe (or prose poem) seems to approach Stein’s ideal: a use of language that is referential without being representational and a slackening of form that is less, not more, expressive.

On this reading, the three sentences of the poem arrange themselves into a kind of debate: the first arguing for the conventional view of prose: “nothing strange” and

³⁴ In the *Modern Fiction Studies* introduction, DeKoven charts changes, decade by decade, in fifty years of scholarship from Stein’s death in 1946 to 1996.

“an arrangement in a system to pointing.” But this view of prose as normal, orderly, and systematic is both accepted and reversed in the next sentence: “All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling.” “All this *and*” something different. Perhaps Stein turns here to the possibility of poetry (“not ordinary” language), in a prose form that is “not unordered in not resembling” [verse]. There seem to be two registers of “order,” both of which are being sidestepped: the “system of pointing” aligned with ordinary prose, and the ordering of versification, which the prose poem does not “resemble.” Nevertheless, Stein insists that the prose poem is “not unordered.” The double negative is the closest thing we get to a positive assertion (and it is not at all clear whether a litotes is intended). The persistent definition by negation is the most striking linguistic feature of *Tender Buttons*, especially when compared to the cumulative style of her other works. Just as common as the definition-style formula *x is y* are the negative phrases *is not*, *is not at all*, *is nothing*, *is never*; and also more emphatic negations: *not any*, *not even*; and for every gnomic assertion beginning *there is*, Stein almost as often writes *there is no*, *there is not*, *there is nothing*³⁵

Negation seems to be built into Stein’s act of seeing, her desire to see things as they are in the present and not “remember” them from past instances or connotations (see *Lectures in America*, 176–79; 188–92). Late in life Stein gave a more forceful statement of this process of leaving out in an interview responding to questions written by Robert Haas.

³⁵ I continue to hear, in the following discussion of negation, the negations in the rhythms of polite speech discussed earlier in this chapter: *Won’t you stay for coffee?*

You must remember each time I took something, I said, I have got to satisfy each realistic thing I feel about it. Looking at your shoe, for instance, I would try to make a complete realistic picture of your shoe. It is devilish difficult and needs perfect concentration, you have to refuse so much and so much intrudes itself upon you that you do not want it, it is exhausting work.³⁶

It becomes clear elsewhere in this interview that one of the things Stein had hoped to refuse, but which ultimately “intruded itself,” was meaning and sense beyond the single word or single object.

While during that middle period I had these two things that were working back to the compositional idea, the idea of portraiture and the idea of the recreation of the word. I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them. All these things interested me very strongly through the middle years from about after the *Making of Americans* until 1911, leading up to *Tender Buttons*, which was the apex of that.³⁷

In *Lectures in America*, Stein had described the difference between *The Making of Americans* and *Tender Buttons* in terms of long and short, verbs and nouns, but here

³⁶ “A Transatlantic Interview (1946),” in Gertrude Stein, *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), 29.

³⁷ “A Transatlantic Interview,” 18.

the distinction is between a positive and a negative approach to composition. *The Making of Americans* was a positive, cumulative project, attempting to include as much as possible: “In trying to make a history of the world my idea here was to write the life of every individual who could possibly live on the earth” (“A Transatlantic Interview,” 16). In the comments on *Tender Buttons* above, Stein lays out a negative or subtractive approach to composition that is reflected not just in the differences of size and scale, but in the negative sentence structure and, I would add, the negative approach to form. As discussed at the end of Chapter One, John Ashbery takes up this tension in Stein between widening inclusion and narrowing precision at the beginning of his *Three Poems*: “I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.”³⁸

The fact that Stein had initially wanted to remove sense entirely from *Tender Buttons* is a sobering one for readers who cannot help but see so many possibilities in each description: puns, etymologies, ambiguities, any number of domestic scenarios. Which make up the complete realistic picture and which are the unwanted intruders? If Stein was aiming at the removal of sense, even though she ultimately had to give up on the goal, it makes sense that she might seek out the prose poem as a “weak” form along the terms suggested at the beginning of this essay: a slackening of formal power that is less not more expressive. If such a form is going to add to the intended meaning of Stein’s word-portraits, it must subtract, helping to refuse any further distractions or

³⁸ Ashbery, *Three Poems*, 3. Readings of *Three Poems* by Monte, Fredman, and others all discuss the work in terms of Ashbery’s debt to Stein. See Chapter One for a discussion of *Three Poems*.

intrusions of unwanted sense. Though impossible to remove entirely, the general orientation toward a reduction of sense remains part of Stein's project. Poetic form (as prose poetry) here is not a musical accompaniment that enhances and amplifies a message, but a kind of white noise that drowns out and negates the distractions of sense that persistently divert our attention. Such formal white noise cannot revert to ordinary prose, though. Prose can perform a neutralizing or leveling effect, but it can't be neutral in and of itself.

Puns

Negating, neutralizing, and refusing sense: this description sounds more like Laura Riding's project to erect a formal fortress against excess meaning, not Stein's. Luckily, Stein's suppression of sense *is* comical, and the noisy distractions are not the world in general, to be walled off at all costs, but a raucous, fun, and genuinely distracting party. As with any party, there is the occasional spill. "The difference is spreading" may indicate just such an accident. In fact, there are quite a few such spills throughout *Tender Buttons*—"Careless Water" (11–12), "A Little Bit of a Tumbler" (13). There are spills on upholstery or tablecloths ("Enough cloth is plenty and more . . . if there is no more spreading" ["A Cloth," 10]). As well as references to broken cups and dishes: "a hurt mended cup" "A New Cup and Saucer" (11); ("Breakfast," 26–28).

With contents carelessly spilling and spreading, is it too much to hear a genre pun in all these leaky, broken vessels? Figures of pouring (*verser*) and glass (*verre*) have a venerable history in French poetry as puns for composing verse;³⁹ could the

³⁹ See Mallarmé, "Salut" for a compact summary of possibilities.

spillage (*déversement*) from Stein's blind glass be a punning reference to the prose poem as a clumsy kind of verse?⁴⁰

Not every pun is such a stretch: it is easy to hear "Alice" in "alas" (as well as "a little less").⁴¹ In other cases, the puns are nearly perfect homophones: be where (beware); mussed ash (moustache); sat in (satin); rub her (rubber). Others are more in the eye: coal age (collage). Stein is getting Byronic with "a near ring" (an earring), "a no since" (innocence), and "a rested development" (arrested development).

Puns raise questions about their readers; they break the fourth wall and leave the house lights up. In puns, the subtlety or unsubtlety of the connection is transferred, at least in part, away from the author and onto the reader's ear and imagination. As with the identification of biographical references, to wonder aloud or insist upon a pun is a matter of openness, ingenuity, and etiquette. But not too much etiquette: Debra Fried, for example, warns against attempts to tame puns' essential wildness and contingency, the very linguistic traits over which so much Stein criticism is debated:

It is dangerous to assume that the local tics of puns in lyric poems must serve a coherent reading of the poem, and that puns that do not mean anything in this

⁴⁰ While *dé-versement* here is a pun, *dérimage*, or un-rhyming, is the name of a real historical phenomenon; see Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987). As discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, elite families in twelfth century France commissioned de-rhymed versions (*dérimages*) of many popular verse romances and epics. At the time, documentary evidence was beginning to be used in jurisprudence, and prose histories were coming to be seen as more authoritative than verse romances, which had their origins in oral performance. Often, the commissioning family expected to be inserted into some important moment in French history, thus "documenting" its honor and prestige. This phenomenon was an important marker of the transition from an oral, verse tradition to written prose history.

⁴¹ Jane Bowers has one of the best ears for Stein puns. See her *Gertrude Stein* (New York: St. Martins, 1993), 84–97. I especially like the echo of both Whitman and Melville she hears in two phrases from "Way Lay Vegetable": "Leaves in grass" for *Leaves of Grass* and "Suppose it is meal" for "Call me Ishmael."

sense are simply not there. Like the Augustan poetic of sound as echo to sense, this tendency toward making puns serve meaning robs them of some of their wildness and shimmering contingency. Like someone who responds to coincidental encounters by denying the sheerly accidental (“It’s a small world”), such readings can seem defenses against the weird accidents, amazing flukes and lucky hits that the one-armed bandit of language dishes up. Yet one can heft even the lightest pun to test its weight against contextual pressures without insisting that whatever puns, puns right. By testing how puns fit or fight other poetic orders of equivalence, correlation, and cogency, we may keep the door ajar to renewed attention to poetic form in the light of current theoretical concerns with overdetermination, indeterminacy and poetic play.⁴²

A test for how puns “fit or fight other poetic orders of equivalence, correlation, and cogency” is precisely what is called for in *Tender Buttons*, especially if the reader really is expected to distinguish the noisy distractions from the pared-down portrait, the accidents of surface from the legitimate “coal age” (collage). What can Stein’s puns tell us about how her persistent copula is meant to be understood? How forceful is the metaphoric innuendo? At times it is as if the groan-inducing pun is the very baseline of equivalence and cogency for the text, not a departure from it.

Crying Foul: Chicken Four Ways

The fluctuating status of puns and other accidental meanings in Stein’s work has been a proving ground for the major critical debates surrounding Stein’s status as a

⁴² Debra Fried, “Rhyme Puns,” in Culler, ed., *On Puns*, 99.

modernist or proto-postmodernist, and the theories of reading, textual autonomy, and authorial intent that ought to follow.⁴³ Language poets, seeing Stein neglected in the canons of high modernism that they feared were becoming settled in the 1980s, sought to rehabilitate her as a postmodernist *avant la lettre*: her combination of aggressive difficulty with humor and wordplay was an inspiration (and often-unattained ideal) in the avant-garde poetry of the culture wars era.⁴⁴ Subsequently, Marjorie Perloff would take those same features—difficulty, humor, and wordplay—to claim Stein for a redrawn Modernism (aligned with Eliot’s early poetry up to, say, Prufrock): poets are still learning the lessons of Modernism, and especially Russian Futurism. Most surprisingly, Jennifer Ashton has argued that Stein’s work sits uneasily in the critical canons related to any of these positions: neither the textual autonomy associated with high modernism; the indeterminacy championed by postmodernist writers; nor even the focus on material effects of the text as a voco-visual text-object apply to Stein.⁴⁵ Instead, for Ashton, Stein’s project is best

⁴³ It goes without saying that historically, Stein is a modernist writer. The debates of the 1980s and 1990s concern how and whether it is legitimate to claim Stein as a foundational figure for later avant-garde movements that celebrate the noisier aspects of her work.

⁴⁴ For example, the “Reading Stein” section of Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, eds., *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1984), 195–207. See also Lyn Hejinian, “Two Stein Talks,” in idem, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 83–130. And “Three Lives” in the same volume, 268–95. Beyond these, see the mini bibliographies in Jennifer Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 177–78n3 and 186–87n27.

⁴⁵ Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 19–29 and 181–82n28. For Ashton, there is a logical equivalence between the new critical verbal icon, the postmodern materiality of the text, and Perloff’s new futurist sound-poem: each of these creates a text-object that is oddly pre-linguistic and therefore unintelligible (by fault of the theoretical premises, not any feature of the text itself). “When words become marks (or incantatory syllables), we have no choice but to experience them—if we want to continue to apprehend them as material objects—we can no longer think of ourselves as reading them . . . because we can no longer think of them as language” (92).

understood as a logical one, and one that is committed to un-hedged notions of determinate meaning, intention, and reference.

This claim turns virtually all Stein scholarship on its head. The phenomenal features of language (sound and the like) take a back seat to the logical function of denotation that is inherent in words as names. At stake is a choice between two types of literalism: a Wittgensteinian one, exemplified by Stein and Riding, in which even difficult and experimental texts follow the normal, plain, everyday functions of the language game complete with denotation, authorial intention, and intellectual content;⁴⁶ or another literalism (the “no ideas but in things” tradition from Williams and Pound to postmodern materialists) in which the text-object is experienced visually and audibly, even tactilely on the page, but not linguistically, because linguistic sense-making relies on cognitive operations such as denotation.

The heart of this disagreement lies in whether accidental meanings can be distinguished from intended ones. Certainly Stein’s explanatory writings from the 1930s seem to confirm Ashton’s assertion that Stein was committed to a theory of determinate meaning. Especially in the lecture format, Stein seems as confident and convinced of the clarity of her writings as she is of her own genius. By Stein’s own account, her word-portraits are a simple affair that should have no trouble evoking the intended object in the reader’s mind. In a television interview during the *Lectures in America* tour, she responds to a question about why her writing is so difficult:

⁴⁶ Oddly, Ashton’s logical position is summed up nicely by one of the readings she intends to challenge. Lyn Hejinian writes, “it is the nature of meaning to be intrinsic” (*Language of Inquiry*, 105).

When they asked me why I don't write as I saw, I answered quite simply that of course I write as I saw, because I talk exactly as I write. It's perfectly easy if you listen to what I say. Now, this is a perfectly simple description of what I have seen. [Reading] 'Pigeons on the grass alas. Pigeons on the grass, alas. Short longer grass. Short longer longer shorter yellow grass. Pigeons, large pigeons, on the shorter longer yellow grass. Alas, pigeons on the grass. Alas the pigeons on the grass. Pigeon on the grass and alas.' [here Stein takes off her reading glasses] Now that's exactly what I have seen in the garden [inaudible: at Bilignin in the morning?] when the pigeons were on the grass.⁴⁷

How could anyone disagree? But this kind of explanation tends to downplay the wildness of the puns, rhyme, repetition, and so on.⁴⁸ Whether these aspects do or do not contribute to the meaning of Stein's text (determinate or indeterminate), an accurate account must put them front and center. Wordplay and repetition, quite frankly, are the reasons we read Stein. More to the point for this dissertation, wordplay, puns, and repetition are precisely those aspects of Stein's *style* that threaten to run roughshod over any distinctions of genre or form at work in her writings. It is these aspects of form—as prose—that we have been trying to trace, even or especially in the places where they are thought to be superfluous, inapplicable, or unremarkable.

⁴⁷ For the newsreel, see: http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675041692_Gertrude-Stein_sleeveless-jacket_spectacles_Reads-from-Opera-libretto. This video was featured in a recent exhibition in San Francisco: "Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories," jointly organized by the Contemporary Jewish Museum and the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., on view in San Francisco 12 May 2011–6 September 2011. Summer 2011 also saw "The Steins Collect," a massive reconstruction of the art collections of all of the Stein siblings, at SF MoMA. "The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 21 May–6 September 2011.

⁴⁸ Even reference—denotation itself—can be wild and slippery, as in the case of "cow" discussed above.

To perceive the formal effects of Stein's leaky, careless prose requires looking and listening very closely. As a negative or subtractive form, the effects of prose and prose poetry on the poems in *Tender Buttons* are sometimes only perceptible by evidence of their absence.

It's perfectly easy if you listen to what I say. I would like to hold out the possibility that meaning is available in a kind of literary listening, a kind of listening that is attentive to the full range of effects and possible readings, from determinate denotation to tenuous speculation. Much more than either "Objects" or "Rooms," the "Food" section of *Tender Buttons* contains the highest concentration of puns, wordplay, and repetition. It is the sonic heart of the volume. "Food" also begins to breakdown the notion (encouraged by Stein in the *Lectures*) that the word-portraits of *Tender Buttons* captured the *essence* of the object she was describing. In "Food," there are several places where there are multiple poems for the same item, challenging the posturing that Stein is engaged in a quest for the perfect one-to-one correspondence of object to description.⁴⁹ In a group of multiple poems on the same topic, specific portraits become members of a class or perhaps even a genre. Each poem must

⁴⁹ The poems with repeated titles are listed below. With the exception of the first two groupings (from "Objects"), all appear in "Food":

A Box (4–5); A Box (6–7)

Mildred's Umbrella (6); A Mounted Umbrella (10); An Umbrella (12)

Milk (30); Milk(30)

Potatoes (33); Potatoes (33); Roast Potatoes (33)

Vegetable (34); Way Lay Vegetable (34)

Chicken (35); Chicken (35); Chicken (35); Chicken (35)

Cream (35); Cream (36)

Eating (36–37); Eating (38); (both are preceded by "Dining" [36])

Orange (38); Orange (38); Oranges (38); Orange in (38)

Salad Dressing and an Artichoke (38); Salad Dressing and an Artichoke (38–39)

oscillate between essence and exemplarity. Where Stein struggled to remove associations,⁵⁰ these repeat-poems start to create associations among themselves.

Of the poem-multiples in the “Food” section, the four poems titled “Chicken” stand out. It is the only group of four, and there seems to be more cross-poem conversation here than in many of the other groups. The following pages will trace, as much as possible, the sound and sense of this short sequence.

Chicken.

Pheasant and chicken, chicken is a peculiar third.

Chicken.

Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a dirty bird.

Chicken.

Alas a doubt in case of more go to say what it is cress. What is it. Mean.

Potato. Loaves.

Chicken.

Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in a
extra succession, sticking in. (*Tender Buttons*, 35)

⁵⁰ This was an aspect of Stein that Williams greatly appreciated. He writes: “Stein has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean.” Williams, *Selected Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1954), 163. This entire essay, from 1934, is a very interesting appreciation of Stein, along similar terms of the poet’s task of “cleansing” language. See also Williams’s earlier essay, reprinted in *Imaginations*, in which he sees Stein as a modern day Laurence Sterne; Williams, *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1970), 346–53.

Certainly there are a number of possible local readings and observations. Chicken *is* a peculiar third in the first poem since it is already the first term in the list—chicken (from the title), pheasant, chicken. Another instance of thirdness is biographical: “Alas [Alice] a dirty third” describes the changing household at 27 rue de Fleurus—Gertrude, Leo, Alice. The “dirty bird” from the second poem seems to derive from a homophonic pun on fowl/foul. If the pun on “foul/fowl” seems plausible enough, an idiomatic phrase involving “fowl,” suggests another way to think of the thirdness of the bird. The *Oxford English Dictionary’s* the fourth definition for “fowl” reads:

- a. The flesh of birds used for food. Now only in the phrases **fish, flesh, and fowl**, etc.
- b. In narrower sense: The flesh of the ‘barn-door’ or domestic fowl.

1672 O. Walker *Of Educ.* i. xii. 160 A feast suggests · · Fish, Foul,
Flesh.

1861 I. M. Beeton *Bk. Househ. Managem.* xxxi. 462 Fricasseed
Fowl · · Ingredients.—The remains of cold roast fowl [etc.].

Perhaps these poems take place in the aftermath of such a grand feast spanning seafood, meat, and poultry. The trio of “fish, flesh, and fowl” would remain in Stein’s ear for years to come, as in the following passage from “Patriarchal Poetry” (1927):

Was it a fish was heard was it a bird was it a cow was stirred was it a third was
it a cow was stirred was it a third was it a bird was heard was it a third was it a

fish was heard was it a third. Fishes a bird cows were stirred a bird fishes were
heard a bird cows were stirred a third. A third is all. Come too.⁵¹

The rhyme words in this passage seem to recapitulate the life cycle of the animal destined for the table: *bird*, *heard*, *stirred*, and *third* chart a progression from the outdoors to the kitchen and to the table. First the living *bird* is *heard*, then killed, prepped and *stirred*, and finally served *third*. Unsettlingly, the passage introduces the unstable term “cow” among the other foodstuffs, but here context overrides encrypted meaning: the use of cow instead of beef serves to underscore the liveliness of the animals prior to slaughter. The tragic ambiguity here is between being stirred (awake) and stirred (in a pot).

In the third Chicken poem, the scenario seems to have returned to the planning of a single party; there is some worry about what to do “in case of more”: in case more guests arrive than planned. We might read “mean” in this poem as a portmanteau of “meat” and “lean,” in response to the question “what is it.” This seems further supportable since the end of that poem contains a list of accompanying food items—although the “loaves” at the end suggest that the planners have given up planning for uninvited guests and entrusted any further needs to miraculous multiplication of the loaves. If loaves imply fishes, then this poem also covers flesh, fish, and fowl.

As for the fourth poem, “sticking” may refer to the cooking process (it is worth noting that the poem “Cooking” immediately precedes these four poems). A bird, once stuffed, often must be stuck or pinned back together for cooking, so the “sticking in” may refer both to stuffing and the subsequent pinning. The phonemic similarity

⁵¹ “Patriarchal Poetry” in Stein, *Bee Time Vine* (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1953), 258.

between “sticking” and “chicken” is certainly strong, though I am most struck by the repetition in this poem of “stick stick,” as if the location of the poem is temporarily transposed from the kitchen to the barnyard, feeding the chickens (“Here chick chick!”) or luring them out to be collected for the meal.

This last scenario, however, raises an interesting question: to what extent do Stein’s idiomatic puns *imply* a narrative situation (feeding chickens in the barnyard)? Are these punning evocations of feeding chickens in the yard or a feast of fish, flesh, and fowl really there? Does the identification of an implicit narrative qualify as a satisfying “reading” of the poem? In reading “A Piece of Coffee,” I suggested that the line “a piece of coffee is not a detainer” was, in part a punning reworking of the negative phrasing common in polite requests (“won’t you stay for coffee?” and so on). But Stein’s version shortens and condenses these polite exchanges, suggesting a conscious movement away from the implicit narrative.

Nevertheless, I find it difficult to make sense of “alas” in the second and third poems beyond the alas/Alice pun without resorting to some kind of implied narrative: taking a cue from the fact that “alas” comes in only after “Chicken” starts repeating, we might imagine a scenario in which Stein is dismayed at having chicken several meals in a row. These considerations lead into the most interesting problem posed by this group of poems: why write four poems, all of which are called “Chicken”? What does it mean to write more than one poem with the same title? Are the poems somehow “the same” or equivalent and if so, in what ways? If Stein’s aim in *Tender Buttons* is to make word-portraits that arrive at essences, what is meant by the

multiplicity of essences for “chicken” and how do these differ from the cubist technique in which multiple perspectives fall under one title?

The notion of “leftovers” seems to be one plausible explanation, born out by the fact that there are only forty titles listed for the fifty-one poems in the *Food* section.⁵² But if we continue following the problem of the poems’ multiplicity, we run into a certain kind of generic instability: perhaps the poems represent individual dishes that Stein is assessing,⁵³ or perhaps they are items on a menu, or recipes in a cookbook. These last two possibilities play perfectly into Stein’s professed desire to renew the power of names to evoke an object when “we who had known the names so long did not get a thrill from just knowing them.” Chicken-as-recipe and chicken-as-menu-item begin to suggest something beyond just the identity of the chicken: different ways of *relating* to chicken. It is only in the context of being repeated that the “Chicken” poems begin to suggest modes of relation to chicken (as chef, as diner) in addition to static identification or description of the essence of chicken.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the ambiguous genre designation—menu or cookbook—introduces the possibility of

⁵² In the *Autobiography*, Hélène is said to be very frugal, never letting food go to waste.

⁵³ Biographical works by and about Stein and Toklas are filled with comparative assessments of the cooking talents of their various housekeepers. See the chapter in the *Cookbook* titled “Servants in France.” Toklas reports that skill in cooking required a social sense beyond mere technique and planning; Toklas’s praise for Hélène is based on her ability to insult as well as flatter guests through cooking: “If you wished to honor a guest you offered him an omelette *soufflé* with an elaborate sauce, if you were indifferent to this an omelette with mushrooms or *fines herbes*, but if you wished to be insulting you made fried eggs” (*Cookbook*, 171).

⁵⁴ Marguerite Murphy explores the idea that some of the items in *Tender Buttons* might be read as recipes, providing some implicit rhetorical context for Stein’s imperatives, and suggesting that the ingredient list might be lurking in the background as a principle of order. Very fruitfully, Murphy also hears an echo in Stein of the shorthand, paratactic style found in various American cookbooks from the period. See Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion*, 151–64. On the difference and occasional antagonism between lists and discursive prose, see Paul Tankard, “Reading Lists,” *Prose Studies* 28, no. 3 (2006): 337–60. He writes: “Lists, I would argue, assist us to clarify the nature of prose (as something other than merely ‘not verse’). Poems, like lists, are essentially vertical, prose essentially horizontal. Prose is a literature of elaboration and progression, in the one direction” (353).

different subject positions: the menu item is addressed to the diner/employer while the recipe speaks to the chef/housekeeper. This floating perspective—a sort of *free indirect description*—is an innovation with respect to other cubist techniques in *Tender Buttons*, where one has the sense of viewing an object from different angles, but not different subjective points of view.⁵⁵ (To designate the recipe as a supposedly feminine discourse in the Stein/Toklas household is an oversimplification that elides both the chef/diner distinction as well as the economic relations that underpin the household operations.) At the same time, the referent—the chicken dish itself—remains the same, but also begins to expand to encompass dozens or even hundreds of potential preparations (for the cook) or food memories (for the diner).

Is it legitimate to open an inquiry at this point into the dietary habits of pre-war literary Paris, or might the chicken turn out to be just as unstable as the “cow”? Though written much later, *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* (1954) is a worthwhile starting point. Toklas’s *Cookbook* contains over twenty recipes for chicken (by far the largest category), and it also offers a host of interesting facts and anecdotes spanning the whole of her life with Stein. In the 1910s, Toklas would sometimes prepare meals on Sunday when the household staff had the day off, but she would not begin to cook in earnest until the Occupation. Her account of the first years of her relationship with Stein is the story of Hélène’s cooking for the Gertrude-Leo-Alice household during the period in which *Tender Buttons* was written. Since none of the principle residents

⁵⁵ Such *free indirect description* gently resists Jennifer Ashton’s slippery slope argument whereby a reading that is contingent upon a subjective stance (or “experience” or the work) risks turning the text into a non-linguistic object. This floating subject position is fully entailed by the literary work; it is not an invitation to project anyone’s subjective thoughts about chicken into the meaning of the poems.

were actively preparing food during this period, the subject positions mentioned above (preparer/consumer) start to solidify along employer/employee lines as well. And so the “Chicken” poems open onto questions of class distinctions in a domestic space less familiar to contemporary readers. “Alas a dirty bird,” from Helène’s perspective might have to do with the unpleasant labor of butchering, cleaning, and preparing chickens for the table,⁵⁶ while the same phrase might merely be an expression of boredom or distaste on the part of Gertrude, Leo, Alice, or their guests. The consumer perspective serves as a reminder of the extent to which the household served to publicly display the Steins’ “taste,” as art collectors, interior designers, and as culinary moderns.

In 1903 Auguste Escoffier published *Le Guide Culinaire*, now considered the foundational text of modern French *haute cuisine*. Escoffier, as executive chef of the Ritz Hotel in Paris and the Carlton in London, instituted the military-style *brigade de cuisine* hierarchy still in use in large professional kitchens. In the preface to *Le Guide Culinaire*, Escoffier acknowledges a transformation of technique, preparation, the arrangement of menus, service, and even of his understanding of “the fundamental principles of Science,” but he distinguishes all of these from the development of new recipes.⁵⁷ For Escoffier the change in technique and method are true advancements

⁵⁶ As she writes in the chapter “Murder in the Kitchen,” Toklas would come to know this side of things herself, though Stein remained the consumer, refusing to witness the killing of poultry. Toklas eventually came to draw a connection between cookbooks and crime fiction: “Cook-books have always intrigued and seduced me. When I was still a dilettante in the kitchen they held my attention, even the dull ones, from cover to cover, the way crime and murder stories did Gertrude Stein. When we first began reading Dashiell Hammett, Gertrude Stein remarked that it was his modern note to have disposed of his victims before the story commenced. Goodness knows how many were required to follow as the result of the first crime. And so it is in the kitchen” (*Cookbook*, 37).

⁵⁷ I quote from Cornell University’s English translation available online through the Internet Archive: August Escoffier, *A Guide to Modern Cookery* (London: Heinemann, 1907), vi. <http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924000610117>

and truly “modern,” but he registers a firm “alas” when it comes to the pressure to create ever-new recipes and combinations:

But novelty is the universal cry—novelty by hook or by crook! It is an exceedingly common mania among people of inordinate wealth to exact incessantly new or so-called new dishes. Sometimes the demand comes from a host whose luxurious table has exhausted all the resources of the modern cook’s repertory, and who, having partaken of every delicacy, and often had too much of good things, anxiously seeks new sensations for his *blasé* palate. Anon, we have a hostess, anxious to outshine friends with whom she has been invited to dine, and whom she afterwards invites to dine with her. Novelty! It is the prevailing cry; it is imperiously demanded by everyone. (Escoffier, “Preface,” vii)

For the culinary modernist, it would seem that “make it new” is primarily a consumerist demand, not fundamental to the transformations of his art at the turn of the century. Escoffier blames his patrons’ *ennui* for the feverish pleasure-seeking that has caused him and his fellow chefs countless nights in the kitchen after hours performing “feats of ingenuity” (vii). Moreover, Escoffier laments that his creations receive no legal protection (unlike artists, sculptors, and writers) and rarely even fame and good reputation, since the next chef could just as easily botch one’s latest creation (vii). Still, the chef obliges his patrons in their quest for novelty: where Stein supplies four Chicken poem-recipes, Escoffier details 347 preparations for poultry in *Le Guide Culinaire*.

It would appear that Stein was among those who worried over novelty, or at least freshness, in the kitchen. Toklas claims in the *Cookbook* that, when considering whether she would take the trip to America in 1934–35, Stein’s decision was contingent upon the quality of the food there. Having become thoroughly accustomed to French food, she is apprehensive about returning to the U.S. after more than three decades:

When during the summer of 1934 Gertrude Stein could not decide whether she did or did not want to go to the United States, one of the things that bothered her was the question of the food she would be eating there. Would it be to her taste? A young man from the Bugey had lately returned from a brief visit to the United States and had reported that the food was more foreign to him than the people, their homes or the way they lived in them. He said the food was very good but very strange indeed—tinned vegetable cocktails and tinned fruit salads, for example. Surely, said I, you weren’t required to eat them. You could have substituted other dishes. Not, said he, when you were a guest. (*Cookbook*, 123).

Eventually Stein was reassured when an American friend “[sent them] a menu from the restaurant of the hotel [they] would be staying at when Gertrude Stein lectured in his hometown” (123). Stein and Toklas’s scrutiny of this menu leads to a final decision: “The variety of the dishes was a pleasant surprise even if the tinned vegetable cocktails and fruit salads occupied a preponderant position. Consolingly, there were honey-dew melons, soft-shell crabs and prime roasts of beef. We would undertake the great adventure” (123). Reading this comment it is easy to forget—

certainly Toklas has forgotten—that this *great adventure* occurred at the height of the Great Depression, and Stein’s concern over hotel restaurant menus and canned food must have seemed as eccentric to most Americans as her writing style.⁵⁸ Stein’s lectures on that trip have been immensely important to the reading of her work, and of *Tender Buttons* in particular. Having won popular success with the *Autobiography* and genuine affection from the GIs, Stein was able to reintroduce her earlier works to a broader audience, this time under much more favorable circumstances. Her descriptions, twenty years later, of her goals and methods in writing *The Making of Americans*, *Tender Buttons*, and other works provide an explanatory fabric that is difficult to set aside when attempting to imagine how these works might have appeared early on, without such framing. If Toklas’s account is to be believed, and Stein’s apprehensions about American food culture almost derailed the trip, perhaps her reengagement with *Tender Buttons* in the *Lectures in America* bears some trace of this deep concern with food.

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Beyond the culinary plane, the Chicken poems recall other sets of four in Stein’s work, for example, “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.” But the four poems do not share

⁵⁸ I confess to having an overly personal reaction to this particular gesture of snobbery. Stein’s Parisian high life is bothersome but tolerable; her expectations of creature comforts in the United States are somehow less so, perhaps because of a family story I often heard growing up: At the time Stein was giving the *Lectures in America*, my own grandfather was in college at a small school in Missouri (and so relatively fortunate by the standards of the day). By this point in the Depression, the school had no administrative staff, faculty went virtually unpaid, and the remaining senior administrators had more or less given up on collecting tuition. Instead, they developed a work-study arrangement with students and faculty alike. Students and faculty farmed the campus cooperatively for food, and shared administrative duties as well as building maintenance throughout the time my grandfather was enrolled. In an irony of culinary fashion, and perhaps an echo of hard times past, canning and preserving are now (at the time of this writing) very much in vogue among foodies of all economic classes.

the circularity of the rose motto. What motivates the four-ness of this group?

Presumably the motivation is very strong, since it must overcome the play of threes and thirds that suffuse the language of each of the short poems. Or perhaps it should be described as a lack of motivation, evidence of a “weak” use of form, that the triadic poem comes awkwardly divided in four parts. The fourth poem speaks to the prose form’s lax approach to upholding or reinforcing the tripartite structure. As a form, it fails to constrain. In *Spring and All*, Williams took a different approach when his prose met with an impasse: “If the power to go on falters in the middle of a sentence—that is the end of that sentence—Or if a new phase enters at that point it is only stupidity to go on.” (*CEP*, 1:226). Stein’s prose does not fall silent or take up a new direction—the default mode for her prose is continuing on and on, as in the rest of her prose works. This is one account of how three poems about threes spill into a fourth.⁵⁹

The four-ness of the “Chicken” poems also brings to mind another group of four poems. Literary allusion is rare in Stein, but I find it difficult to read four poems of the same title—meditating on boredom, violence, and murder, no less!—without thinking of the four poems named “Spleen” in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) (poems LXXV–LXXVIII).⁶⁰ Stein’s poems seem to borrow something from the formal principle that Baudelaire sets out in his group of four. In the Spleen poems, Baudelaire explores the multi-perspectivalism that Stein encodes in her Chicken poems. While

⁵⁹ Recall that Stein describes the labor of writing *Tender Buttons* in terms of leaving things out: “It is devilish difficult and needs perfect concentration, you have to refuse so much and so much intrudes itself upon you that you do not want it, it is exhausting work.” “A Transatlantic Interview (1946),” in Gertrude Stein, *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), 29.

⁶⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres*, ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec (Paris: Pléiade, 1934), 85–88.

each poem can be thematically linked to Baudelaire's conception of boredom and of "spleen" (almost as if in the mode of definition), each poem radically shifts its perspective away from a centralized speaker.

The first Spleen poem is largely impersonal, its chief actors being the weather of the republican month Pluvôise, a cat, a church bell, and a deck of cards.⁶¹ In the second, the speaker himself is an inanimate landscape—"Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune" (v. 8)—which affords him a perspective from which to mock the living (the "matière vivante"; v. 19). The third "Spleen" poem is the most unbalanced of all. The "I" is introduced in the opening line—"je suis comme le roi d'un pays pluvieux."⁶²—but the extended analogy, once begun, continues to the end of the poem and never circles back to the speaker, leaving the "je" strangely void of content. The analogy that begins as an explanation of the speaker ends up marginalizing him in favor of the descriptor, the *roi*. And yet this king remains boxed inside the analogy, with no independent existence outside of the relation to the "je suis comme le roi" in the opening line. The unbalanced comparison diminishes rather than enhances both sides of the analogy. With speakers so weak, the poems default to the weather.⁶³ The rainy conditions are their most consistently shared feature.

The poet's voice returns in the fourth Spleen poem, but only as an afterthought (an "alas" really) to the poem's single long sentence. Here is the final stanza:

⁶¹ Pluvôise is the fifth month of the republican calendar (from January 20th to February 18th).

⁶² If four spleen poems are not enough, see Nicholas Moore, *Spleen* (London: Menard/Blacksuede Boot Press, 1973; reprint, /ubu editions, 2004). www.ubu.com/ubu. Moore composed thirty-one versions of "Je suis comme le roi d'un pays pluvieux" for a translation contest judged by George Steiner for the Times of London in 1968.

⁶³ Together the rainy Spleen poems read like a re-writing of Bürger's "Lenore" from the perspective of the weather and the inanimate landscape.

—Et de longs corbillards, sans tambours ni musique,
 Défilent lentement dans mon âme; l’Espoir,
 Vaincu, pleure, et l’Angoisse atroce, despotique,
 Sur mon crâne incliné plante son drapeau noir.
 (v. 17–20)⁶⁴

This poem, like the fourth Chicken poem, ends by spilling out of its shape. The first four stanzas are made up of three orderly “when” clauses, followed by a chaotic ringing of bells that could very well mark the end of the sequence (and the sentence), but instead the poem lurches on for one final stanza. Anticipating Beckett’s “I can’t go on, I’ll go on,” the fourth poems in “Chicken” and “Spleen” shared a kind of exhaustion that keeps going after the point has been made. Compare the planting of the black flag to the “sticking in” in Stein: “Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in a extra succession, sticking in” (35). What else can explain the word “succession” in Stein’s poem than that Baudelaire’s Anguish conquers and succeeds the king of the rainy land? One might expect only three poems about chicken, the dirty third, but Stein’s fourth poem seems “stuck in” or planted, as a nod, perhaps, to Baudelaire and to the unacknowledged, repetitive violence of the kitchen.

Most poems with repeated titles bear innocuous, generic names—*Song*, *Poem*, *Sonnet*. The poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* and in *Spleen de Paris* are numbered as well as titled in their published editions. The numbers reach over a hundred because of

⁶⁴ “—and long hearses, without pomp and circumstance, process slowly through my soul; defeated Hope weeps while atrocious, despotic Anguish plants her black flag into my bowed skull.”

what they have in common: that they are poems. (Likewise with Escoffier's poultry dishes.) Y.-G. Le Dantec's annotations to Baudelaire's *Oevres* reveal that leading up to *Les Fleurs du Mal* there were three additional poems known by the name "Spleen": the poems now known as "De Profundis Clamavi" (XXX), "Le Mort Joyeux" (LXXII), and "La Cloche Félée (LXXIV). To add these three to the other four Spleen poems, and those seven poems in verse to the fifty prose poems grouped under *Spleen de Paris* . . . at what point does the practice of naming things "Spleen" become just another system of numbering? At what point does the label *Spleen* become a general condition of the poem, so that we count spleens in the same way we count poems? Is Spleen now a genre?

Stein's Chicken poems gesture toward the same question, especially when seen as stand-ins for the hundreds of Chickens and poems conceived, cooked, and consumed over a lifetime. A combination of boredom and bodily function results in the prevailing cry for more Chicken poems, and still more new preparations. The poem as food object—whose essence, Stein suggests, is to be repeatedly consumed—evokes daily consumption. At what point does being "stuck in" become a general condition of the poem?

Sticking in a extra succession, sticking in. Stein's fourth Chicken poem has led to a dark place, a bad infinity of genre that is stuck on repeat and can't move forward. Or worse: sticking in suggests a kind of poetic force-feeding, sticking more and more chickens in the oven, when they are clearly not needed or desired. Stein's great talent is repetition, but here she finds the poems in an unwanted rut. As Stein told Robert Haas, "you have to refuse so much and so much intrudes itself upon you that you do

not want it.” This unwanted intrusion finds its way into *Tender Buttons* with this group of four poems. But this is not to say that the poems fail. The fourth, “extra” Chicken poem yields important insight into how prose works, or declines to work, in shaping the poems of *Tender Buttons*. It is precisely because of the prose poem’s loose and unemphatic shaping—its lack of formal reinforcement to a set of “approved” meanings of the poem—that *Tender Buttons* becomes a work where the difference is spreading, puns are proliferating, and both sound and sense are spilling out of bounds.

Tender Button is not commonly discussed in formalist terms. The poems are widely known as prose poems, but in discussions of the genre this work is frequently presented as an anomalous instance of the genre, the exception that proves the rule. I have been arguing that prose in *Tender Buttons* operates as the absence of emphasis. It is a negative, slack, or careless shaping. Careless shaping is not the same as plain, ordinary, or straightforward, however. In the two previous chapters, I discussed how Riding and Williams use an idea (or ideas) of prose to sharpen and frame their ideas about poetry and verse. Along the way, they discover surprising and interesting resources of prose—a way of achieving a zero-degree of dryness for poetic purposes in Riding, and a way of talking about and highlighting pace and tempo in Williams that is less systematic than the prosody he would struggle to match to his practice.

Stein is largely uninterested in making a sharp contrast with verse. Instead, she uses her idea of prose to take advantage of further possibilities in prose. Whether legitimate or not, the puns, rhyme, and rhythms—its accidents of surface—are colliding all over *Tender Buttons*, alongside the more stable-seeming references to

people, places, and events. Whether she meant for the reader to filter out the noise to arrive at a determinate meaning or not, she created a text with a slippery surface.

A more assertive form than prose would be a fairer house, but it would *limit* this chaos of possibilities by suggesting shapes, structures, or patterns that could be used to rule some of the wordplay *in* as legitimate and rule other parts *out* as accidental. Stein at her best keeps the reader guessing at what is “there” (or “there there”), and prose is the shape that may or may not be merely a spill.

CONCLUSION

“Through Apparent Digressions.—The Idea of the Poem is Prose”: On Badiou and the Poem

I. *Protagoras*; or, The Philosopher as Literary Critic

“I have a wretched memory, and when anyone makes a long speech to me
I never remember what he is talking about.”¹

Stories about the conflict between philosophy and literature inevitably begin with Plato. Indeed, Plato is the supreme bogey-man of the entire genre of the “defense of poetry,” so much so that poetry’s defenders and those who seek a less agonistic relation between philosophy and literature often forget that literature plays a recurring, if not central, role in Plato’s writings and that Plato’s Socrates, whatever his faults, actually does something like literary criticism at various points in the *Dialogues*. This Socratic literary criticism is most sustained in *Protagoras*, Socrates’ epic debate about education with the sophist for whom the dialogue is named. *Protagoras* is fascinating because it is one of the more evenly matched dialogues; even when we see Socrates toying with and goading Protagoras, it is not entirely clear that he is, in fact, “winning.” Both characters in the dialogue seem to sense the precariousness of their positions such that they feel it necessary to pause the argument periodically in order to lay down the ground rules about the *style* of their discussion (they decide to alternate who gets to ask the questions and who has to answer, etc.). Some of the basic questions Socrates raises in this dialogue are, “can virtue be taught?” and “are you,

¹ Socrates to Protagoras in the *Protagoras* dialogue; Plato, *The Works of Plato: The Jowett Translations*. (New York: Modern Library, 1956), 225. Subsequent citations of the dialogue will appear in-line as *Protagoras* followed by the page number.

Protagoras, justified in charging young men and their families for this service?” Given the literary orientation of much of the discussion, we might also add the questions, what is the role of literature in Socratic (or sophistical) pedagogy?, and, what counts as literary criticism in Platonic philosophy?

Both the style and substance of such questions have renewed contemporary relevance due to recent discussions by and about the French philosopher Alain Badiou among literary theorists.² Interest in Badiou for literary theorists has been noteworthy, if also somewhat counterintuitive, for his flat rejection of Kant’s critical turn, and with it the linguistic turn that underpins much of the structuralist and poststructuralist thought that has made such a significant impact on literary theory since the 1960s. Badiou argues against Kant’s subjective stance, in which we cannot have access to things-in-themselves but only to information about the world as filtered through the limitations of sensory perception, the coordinates of space and time, and the structure of the understanding. Instead, Badiou calls for a philosophy that proceeds by axioms, on the model of advanced mathematics.³ Where much continental philosophy started from the post-Kantian critical premise that the understanding (and for later thinkers, the structure of language above all) provides an inescapable limit to philosophy’s

² Badiou and his thought was the discussion of many papers at a 2008 conference hosted by the Cornell Theory Reading Group, *The Substance of Thought*. Nathan Brown published a review of the conference in *Radical Philosophy*, which does an excellent job of framing much of what is at stake in the discussion of Badiou’s thought for literary theory and contemporary continental philosophy; see Nathan Brown, “Critical Pivot,” *Radical Philosophy* 150 (July/August 2008) 71–72. The program for this conference, at which I presented an early version of the argument here, can be found at www.arts.cornell.edu/trg/conf2008.html.

³ The most comprehensive elaboration of Badiou’s thought can be found in the two-volume work *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005) and *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009). The original French editions of these works, *L’être et l’événement* and *Logiques des Mondes* were published almost twenty years apart, in 1988 and 2006.

access to truth about the world, Badiou and many of his proponents take up a variety of realist positions grounded in mathematics, logic, or various scientific methodologies. In wanting to engage with capital-T truth, without the epistemological hedging customary to critical thought, Badiou reaches far behind Kant, whose critical turn is typically seen to mark the foundation of modern philosophy, and takes up Plato and the philosophical field of ontology as a model for his mode of engagement. A certain kind of classicism, and frequent reference to Plato specifically, is a hallmark of Badiou's writing though another is his insistence that philosophy be grounded in and appropriate to its specific historical moment (the concern of the "event" portion in the title of his signature work).

Badiou's emphasis on logic and mathematics does not mean that he is uninterested in literature and the arts, which proves to be such a fruitful ground of inquiry in the work Jacques Derrida and so many other recent and contemporary continental philosophers. In fact, Badiou engages regularly and at length with literature, with works by Samuel Beckett, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Wallace Stevens receiving particular attention. Much of my interest in his work stems from wanting to understand how and why he engages literary works while also rejecting the premises of the linguistic turn, which had been at least partially responsible for other philosophers' interest in literature a forum for, and partner in, philosophical inquiry. Badiou by contrast is largely unconcerned with how language as such might constrain the philosopher's access to truth, but this raises the question of how he does engage with literary language in a way that is not motivated by linguistic concerns. The *Protagoras* dialogue, then, provides a particularly useful entry into these questions,

both as an originary moment in the interaction of philosophy and poetry, and in its contemporary relevance for the discussion of Badiou's thought in literary theoretical contexts. The literary discourse in *Protagoras* begins with one of the most famous passages of the dialogue, and one which Badiou is fond of quoting. Protagoras says:

I am of the opinion, Socrates, that skill in poetry is the principle part of education; and this I conceive to be the power of knowing what compositions of the poets are correct, and what are not, and how they are to be distinguished, and of explaining when asked the reason of the difference. And I propose to transfer the question which you and I have been discussing to the domain of poetry. (*Protagoras*, 230)

Socrates, as a literary critic in the exchanges that follow, seems to do what many philosophers have done with poems: he extracts single sentences or phrases as aphorisms and treats them as philosophical propositions, ignoring any context or contrapuntal tension in the larger poem. Moreover, Socrates pays lip service to versification and matters of form, if he mentions it at all: "A great deal might be said in praise of the details of the poem, which is a charming piece of workmanship, and very finished, but such minutiae would be tedious" (*Protagoras*, 237). It would be too hasty to describe Badiou as a philosopher-turned literary critic *exactly* in this fashion. As the author of several novels and plays, in addition to philosophical works, he likely has direct experience with such tedious minutiae. Nevertheless, a cursory reading of Badiou's comments on literature, (and on poems in particular), shows him very much to be following Socrates' lead.

It should be noted at the outset that Badiou anticipates and responds to the line of critique pursued in the following pages, and that he frames the discussion in terms of Platonism and anti-Platonism. He writes, in *Manifesto for Philosophy*:

Philosophy through aphorisms and fragments, poems and enigmas, metaphors and maxims—the whole Nietzschean style, which has had so many echoes in contemporary thought, roots itself in the dual exigencies of the destitution of truth and the dismissal of the matheme. An anti-Platonist till the end, Nietzsche subjects the matheme to the plight Plato reserves for the poem, that of a suspect weakness, a disease of thought, a “masquerade.” There is no doubt as to Nietzsche’s enduring victory. It is true that the [twentieth] century has “been cured” of Platonism, and that, in its most vigorous thinking, it has been sutured to the poem, abandoning the matheme to the quibbling of the positivist suture.⁴

It is particularly intriguing that Badiou here attacks “philosophy through aphorisms,” and also that he frames the debate as an issue of *style*. While an undeniable large portion of Badiou’s work is presented in a formal, mathematical style, it is clear that he is also quite comfortable operating in aphorisms, maxims, and metaphors, and that this is the primary style in which he discusses works of literature—though he must clearly see his practices in that mode as distinct and separate from “the whole Nietzschean style” (by which designation he clearly intends his poststructuralist contemporaries such as Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault).

⁴ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy: Followed by Two Essays: “The (re)turn of Philosophy Itself” and “Definition of Philosophy,”* Translated by Norman Madarasz. [Albany, N.Y: State Univ. of New York Press, 1999], 100. Hereafter, *Manifesto*.

Badiou, who prides himself on being an “axiomatic” thinker (though this claim often has a technical, mathematical sense), is very fond of extracting a single line or phrase from a poem, often conveniently missing a crucial rhyme or enjambment or later development in the poem that might complicate the position that he will draw from that now-extracted aphorism. To take an example, Badiou frequently cites the Mallarméan line, from “Un coup de dès,” “l’unique Nombre qui ne peut pas être un autre,” taking this line to exemplify a modern relation to “the linguistic interval between the poem and the matheme in a wholly different fashion than the Greeks.”⁵ By placing this “Number” at a crucial point of the poem’s development of its central metaphor—what will become the “constellation” at the end of “Un coup de dès”—Badiou’s Mallarmé, in this line, is making a statement acknowledging “everything that the poem owes to Number” (*Handbook*, 20). To make the aleatory operation of the dice throw—the Number—the basis of the poem’s central image is to reject previous regimes of poesis such as imagery, metaphor, and myth-making (*Handbook*, 19–20). Rather than forming the poem around an image, metaphor, or myth, Badiou argues that the mathematical operation of the dice throw is, improbably, the *poetic* operation that gets Mallarmé’s poem going, and it is through this link to mathematics that poetry, for Badiou, can lay claim to the status of Idea, and of thinking (without the aid of philosophy). Compelling as it is, what Badiou fails to acknowledge in his reading is that the line continues, after an admittedly strong enjambment, with the pesky word “Esprit” with a capital E: “the unique Number that cannot be another / Spirit.”

⁵ Alain Badiou, “What is a Poem,” in idem, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, translated by Alberto Toscano (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005), 20. Hereafter, *Handbook*.

Mallarmé's syntax, after the enjambment, opposes Number to Spirit, rather than number to "another [Number]," which throws something of a wrench in the works of the interpretation/aphorism that Badiou is after in this line. Opposing one number to another—this is the mathematical operation performed by a cast of the die, but to oppose "Number" to "Spirit"—these are incommensurables, and the reader must look elsewhere in the poem for what grounds their comparison. Once this simple enjambment—the continuation of the syntax beyond Badiou's aphorism to include "Spirit"—is granted, there is no turning back. The poem, usually printed in a double-page format that exceeds the margins of the traditional folio, is organized instead by a dizzying hierarchy of fonts and subordinating syntactical structures; nowhere does it contain a single full stop. This poem, perhaps more than any other in Mallarmé's oeuvre, defies the isolation of individual lines (or similarly formatted phrases) into philosophical slogans since it provides no stable starting- or stopping-points for such an extraction. This is not to say that any one particular line, phrase, or passage is not excerptable for critical discussion, but such discussion must account for the way the poem's form both encourages and undermines such excerpting.

This heavy-handed hermeneutic jury-rigging leaves the reader with the impression that Badiou's glosses on "Un coup de dès" ultimately present a quotation-peppered recapitulation of his own theory of the event as it pertains to undecidable aleatory operations.⁶ Likewise, Badiou's extraordinarily broad assertions about "the

⁶ To some extent, these lapses of interest in the finer points of literary reading make sense: Badiou states that he is not interested in hermeneutics. While I understand that comment as a philosophical position, one wonders if his lack of interest in thinking about interpretation theory negatively affects the quality of his readings of literary works.

poem” as if it were a stable and easily definable category need to be read with a healthy skepticism. When Badiou declares, “The question of the poem is that of the retreat of the gods”⁷ or “Every poem brings a power into language, the power of eternally fastening the disappearance of what presents itself,”⁸ these statements are quite clearly directed internally toward Badiou’s own philosophical system, which attempts to carve out a place for poetic “thinking” that nevertheless allows the philosopher to observe the same kinds of evental developments he describes in the other “truth procedures”—mathematics, politics, and love.⁹ Hence, when Badiou writes, “The poetic path of thinking goes from the void to desiring nostalgia,” readers familiar with Badiou’s writings on poetry will recognize certain terms—presence, void, nostalgia, the retreat of the gods—as regularly recurring thematics not just in his literary commentary, but in the philosophy as a whole.¹⁰ Even these terms, though, are hardly stable. In Meditation 25 of *Being and Event*, Badiou violates his own principles of the non-referential subject- and object-lessness of poetry when he, following and revising Heidegger’s infamous exegeses, glosses Hölderlin’s poems on the Danube and the Rhine as a drama of nationalisms: Greek, German, Caucasian, and Asiatic.¹¹

⁷ Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2006), 28.

⁸ Badiou, *Handbook*, 24–25.

⁹ The schematic argument for philosophy as an intellectual activity that does not create or discover truths, but rather describes and analyzes truths developed in the four truth procedures listed above, can be found in *Manifesto for Philosophy*. The most sustained treatment of “the poem” as a truth procedure can be found in the chapter “The Age of Poets” (a period, now decidedly over for Badiou, ranging from Hölderlin to Celan).

¹⁰ Badiou, *Handbook*, 49.

¹¹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 255–61. Literature has long been intimately involved in both the creation and the critique of such national ideas. What is particularly baffling in this reading is the way in which the poems under discussion seem to merely *exemplify* such attitudes in an unreflective way. True, Hölderlin was deeply concerned with the intersection of mythology and identity, but the poet is almost unrecognizable in Badiou’s glosses because the searching, complicating reflexivity at the heart of

While it is plain, then, that there is plenty of tension between Badiou's philosophical style and that of the literary works he chooses to discuss, what we hope to draw out are some of the consequences and complications arising from significant stylistic conflicts that reside, not between philosophy and poetry, but within philosophy and within poetry. Despite these problematic, axiomatic, and sometimes vulgar readings of poetic texts, there is a group of comments that get to the heart of the stylistic conflict between Badiou's own axiomatic readings of poems and the strain of contemporary philosophy he critiques as "philosophy by aphorism . . . the whole Nietzschean style." These passages have to do with drawing the seemingly self-evident distinction between poetry and prose.

II. Mere Prose

"What is poetry and if you know what poetry is what is prose."
—Stein, "Poetry and Grammar"

The final chapter of the *Handbook of Inaesthetics* is a relatively detailed commentary on Mallarmé's "L'après-midi d'un faun." The poem is a pastoral, set on the edge of a Sicilian marsh. The Faun, the speaker of most of the poem, relates and puzzles over his failed sexual encounter with a pair of nymphs, which seems to have been only a dream. Nevertheless—and this is the source of his puzzlement—the faun wakes up with a bite-mark on his chest. The poem, throughout, is in verse paragraphs of rhyming alexandrine couplets, however, there are three passages that are set off visually by quotation marks and italics. Badiou notes these formatting changes, and draws significant interpretive conclusions based on them:

Hölderlin's poetic and philosophical projects has been passed over without comment and presented as bald assertion.

The poem includes long passages in italics and quotation marks, introduced by capitalized words: RELATE, MEMORIES. An emphatic punctuation is thereby composed, creating a certain intrigue. Opened up by these capitalized imperatives, we find a rather simple narrative style. Under what conditions do these stories intervene, strongly underlined as they are by the italics and quotation marks? [. . .] [T]he stories have no function besides that of suggesting materials for doubt. They are fragments of memory, to be dissolved. And perhaps this is the function of every story. Let us then define “the story” as that thing about which there is doubt. The story is doubtful—not because it’s not true, but because it suggests materials for (poetic) doubt. It’s at this point that prose enters the frame. Let us call “prose” every articulation between the story and doubt. The art of prose is neither the story nor the art of doubt, it is the art of proposing the one to the other. This is the case even though prose might be classified on the basis of a predominance of a delight for the story *or* of an austere presentation of doubt. [. . .] The passages in italics and between quotation marks in *The Afternoon of the Faun* are this poem’s moments of prose. The problem is knowing if poetry is always obliged to expose the story prosaically to the doubt of the poem. (*Handbook*, 125)

Here we have a relatively rare instance of a formal (or at least stylistic) claim in Badiou’s readings of poetry: that certain passages constitute “moments of prose.” Furthermore, this claim is not at all self-evident: yes, the passages are marked off by quotation marks and italics, and yes, their language is generally more narrative and expository than the surrounding lines in roman-faced type. There is certainly a stylistic

shift—Badiou might have noted that none of the poem’s many apostrophes occur in the “prose” section—but the poem remains metrical and rhyming throughout. Prose, in this usage, appears to have nothing to do with the mere presence or absence of versification, but how then are we to make sense of it? Badiou’s working definition for prose appears to swing the discussion away from form and towards content: “prose” is “every articulation between the story and doubt.” Prose here is the name of a relation between narrative and “doubt,” which disrupts narrative. Badiou’s chief concern here seems to be not style, but rather something like the truth status of fiction. In a now-familiar association, prose is the mode seen to be capable of an outside perspective on both the fictional narrative and doubts about it. Even when the production of “doubt” is associated with the poem, the power of reflection (of comparing these doubts against the story itself) seems reserved for prose.

On its face, the suggestion that Mallarmé’s poem contains “moments of prose” could be an off-handed, throwaway comment: Badiou is simply noting a certain prosiness—a “conscious relaxation of poetic energy,” in Laura Riding’s phrase—in these passages of the poem. This Mallarmé essay is not the only place, though, where Badiou talks about “prose” within the poem, and his other remarks on this phenomenon, while also brief, reveal a surprisingly consistent set of concerns. In an essay on Rimbaud, he remarks:

[This exposition] supposes a singular work [*travail*] of prose interior to the poem . . . the installation, by Rimbaud, of a latency of prose inside the poem . . . obtained by the deregulation of verse, the contraction of vocabulary (or diction), possible trivialities, peremptory syntax. And “interruption” [Badiou’s

key concept for Rimbaud and the title of the essay I'm quoting] is the abrupt rise *to the surface* of the poem of the always-possible prose that it detains. . . .

Let's say that prose *impurifies* presence.¹²

So even though Badiou will never get into the minutiae (as Socrates might call it) of what exactly constitutes a “deregulation of verse, contraction of diction, or peremptory syntax,” the word “prose” seems to indicate for Badiou something strange in the poem at the level of form or versification on the one hand, and also to some register of “impurified” or relaxed poetic language on the other. Furthermore, Badiou retains the notion that prose is a relational concept, opposing two tendencies that originate within the poem itself; his essay on Mallarmé's “moments of prose” named the confrontation between the narrative coherence of “story” and challenges to that story (“doubt”); here, in Rimbaud, prose is figured as something that lurks underneath the surface of the poem, latent, but always threatening to erupt.

In *Briefings on Existence*, Badiou links this idea of prose interior to the poem to his reading of (contemporary) poetry's response to the Hölderlinian “flight of the gods”:

Today the poem's imperative is to conquer its own atheism. From within, it destroys the powers of natural language, nostalgic phraseology, posturing of the promise, or prophetic destination to the Open. The poem does not have to be the melancholic guardian of finitude, nor a cross section of a mystique of silence, nor even the occupation of an improbable threshold. The poem has only to be devoted to the enchantment of what the world is capable of—as it is.

¹² Badiou, Alain, et al. *Millinaire Rimbaud*, preface by Jacques Rancière (Paris: Belin, 1993), 134–35.

It has only to discern the infinite “surrection” of invisible possibilities up to the impossible itself. Surely this is what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe takes as the “becoming prose” of the poem. (*Briefings*, 29–30)

There is much to challenge in Badiou’s view of contemporary poetry and its tasks, but laying aside the insults, it is clear in this passage that Badiou’s positive program for poetry—discerning the “surrection of invisible possibilities up to the impossible itself”—is re-phrased immediately in terms of a development toward prose, a “becoming prose” in the words of the late Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe. Badiou expands slightly on this reference to Lacoue-Labarthe in a seminar in Wagner:

For Lacoue-Labarthe, this [question of the distinction between art and non-art] takes the form of a theory of the contemporary poem as becoming-prose, where the essence of contemporary poetry is the becoming prose of the poem. Because the delimitation between poem and prose is exactly what the poem must put into question, the essence of the poem is the impurify itself as prose, and not to wish itself to be the pure poem, the great poem.¹³

To recapitulate the investigation this far, we have posed the question of what Badiou means when he calls the “narrative” passages in “Afternoon of a faun” *prose*. Badiou, in other passages where he discusses a prose that is interior to the poem, cites Lacoue-Labarthe on the ‘becoming-prose’ of the poem. Because of his stylistic opposition to footnotes, Badiou does not make it easy to follow up on his citations, but Lacoue-Labarthe’s late work provides several possible sources for Badiou’s references. In

¹³ Alain Badiou, “De la dialectique négative dans sa connexion à un certain bilan de Wagner,” lecture delivered to ENS. January 8, 2005, transcript by Nancy Mentelin, retrieved electronically: <http://www.entretiens.asso.fr/Adorno/Badiou.1.pdf>. My translation.

these passages, Lacoue-Labarthe consistently connects his notion of the “becoming-prose of the poem” to Walter Benjamin’s thesis *On the Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* (which Lacoue-Labarthe translated in French) and to Benjamin’s discussion of the Hölderlinian concept of poetic “sobriety”:

Sobriety, we know, is what Benjamin . . . in his essay on Jena Romanticism, will identify with prose. He will say, in speculative terms borrowed from Fichte: “The Idea of poetry is prose.” And for this very reason he will make Hölderlin the secret—decentered—centre of Romanticism. One could thus risk saying, somewhat tersely: sobriety is the courage of poetry. Or else: the courage of poetry is prose. Which does not, of course, exclude versification.¹⁴

It would take a book-length project in itself to trace just how Benjamin develops the concept of prose in his dissertation, but we can isolate three short points, or trajectories, for “prose” that Lacoue-Labarthe identifies in the early Benjamin. First, as Lacoue-Labarthe notes in the introduction to his French translation of *The Concept of Criticism*, Benjamin held Kant’s prose as his ideal of philosophical style. In a letter to Gershom Sholem Benjamin writes, “every critique of [Kant’s] style is . . . sheer narrow-mindedness and vulgar gossip. It is absolutely true that in every great scientific creation art must be included (and vice versa) and, consequently, it is also my belief that the prose of Kant itself represents the threshold of a great prosaic art.”¹⁵ Second,

¹⁴ Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Poetry’s Courage,” in Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin, eds., *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 178. Hereafter, Lacoue-Labarthe, “Poetry’s Courage.”

¹⁵ Gershom Sholem to Walter Benjamin, quoted in Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Introduction,” Walter Benjamin, *Le concept de critique esthétique dans le romantisme allemande*, edited by Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), 15.

prose is identified with the concept of “reflection” in German Romanticism. Benjamin writes in the dissertation:

The idea of poetry has found its individuality (that for which Schlegel was seeking) in the form of prose; the early Romantics know no deeper or better determination for it than “prose.” In this seemingly paradoxical but in truth very profound intuition, they find an entirely new basis for the philosophy of art. On this ground rests the entire philosophy of art of early Romanticism, especially its concept of criticism, for the sake of which our investigation has been pursued to this point through apparent digressions.—The idea of poetry is prose.¹⁶

Benjamin here is actually talking about the Romantic theory of the novel, or a kind of second-order writing that is the prose of prose, where the “novel” is a kind of power set of all genres, including poetry and poetic genres. The paradox of Romantic irony as the German Romantics developed it, is that while the romantically ironic position (as a model for criticism) creates a broader perspective on the work, it simultaneously creates a position that is not included in that position, leading to an infinite regress of positions: the irony of irony can only be comprehended by the irony of the irony of irony, and so on. Or, in an epistolary novel (such as Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*), a character reflecting on the events of his life in a series of letters must eventually reach the point at which he writes the first letter, which would necessitate reflecting on the initial reflection itself. A new order of reflection arises at each juncture, but the philosophical

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” in idem, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 1: 1913–1926, edited by Michael Jennings, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), 173.

stakes of this paradox become clear at this point: the concept of reflection must necessarily become temporalized. Reflection cannot rely on an a-temporal perspective. The implications of this concept of “reflection” for criticism are precisely what Benjamin seeks to work out in his dissertation. “Prose,” then, names the incomplete, temporalized critical perspective of a properly romantic “idea of poetry” or “theory of the novel.”

As a third trajectory of prose in Benjamin, it is identified with the poetic sobriety [Nüchternheit] of Hölderlin:

The thesis that establishes [Holderlin’s] philosophical relation to the Romantics is the principle of the sobriety of art. This principle is the essentially quite new and still incalculably influential leading idea of the Romantic philosophy of art . . . Its connection with the methodological procedure of that philosophy—namely, reflection—is obvious. In ordinary usage, the prosaic—that in which reflection as the principle of art appears uppermost—is, to be sure, a familiar metaphorical designation of the sober. As a thoughtful and collected posture, reflection is the antithesis of ecstasy, the mania of Plato.¹⁷

To follow this concept of prose-sobriety further would require a close reading of the relevant Hölderlin texts where, as Benjamin rightly hints here, Hölderlin relates his concept of sobriety—still conceived in stylistic terms—to the antithesis of temperance

¹⁷ Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” 175.

(sobriety) and mania in Plato's *Phaedrus*.¹⁸ While this philosophical lineage is clearly important to Benjamin, he also builds his argument on a deliberate slippage between the conventional senses of prose and the prosaic. Winfried Menninghaus uses this slippage as an example of the "questionable conclusions" Benjamin draws near the end of the dissertation, conclusions that, in Menninghaus's words, "fall somewhere between being off the mark and simply wrong . . . [Benjamin] almost seamlessly integrates the Romantic idea of prose—regardless of its complex meaning for the Romantic philosophy of form—into the more content-based significance of what is called 'prosaic.'"¹⁹ Rodolphe Gasché notes the slippage between prose and the prosaic as well. He writes, glossing Benjamin's dissertation:

In order to conceive of prose's 'unifying function,' its role as the 'creative ground' of poetical forms, it is necessary that it be understood in all its senses;

¹⁸ Beatrice Hanssen goes a long way towards establishing and clarifying the Plato-Hölderlin-Benjamin lineage of sobriety in her excellent and informative essay "'Dichtermut' and 'Blödigkeit'—Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin, Interpreted by Walter Benjamin," in Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin, eds., *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 139–62. "By thus underscoring the word 'sobriety,'" Hanssen writes, "Benjamin called upon a poetic *topos* vital to Hölderlin's work as a whole" (147). Hanssen establishes that, in Benjamin's reading, sobriety was "the antidote to Platonic *mania* . . . the law that ruled the structure of reflection, conceived of as a dialectic between sober self-reflection and ecstatic self-extension" (148). Furthermore, sobriety was intimately linked to the romantics' conception of form for Benjamin:

In contrast to aesthetic theories that either interpreted form as the expression (*Ausdruck*) of beauty or advocated the lawlessness of the ecstatic, creative *Genie* concept of the Storm and Stress movement, Benjamin defined Romantic reflection as a sober, prosaic mechanics of *techne* or form. Objective irony or irony of form was its structure. Tying together these observations about objective irony, reflection, and the law of sobriety, Benjamin concluded that "the Romantics were thinking of 'made' works, works filled with prosaic spirit when they formulated the thesis of the indestructibility of genuine art objects." [. . .] If the artwork harboured an indestructible yet veiled core, then the task of genuine reflective art criticism was to active objective irony; by peeling away the work's outward layer, its final 'consummation' could be fully achieved. Essentially, this meant that the work's external form needed to be shed so as to reveal the eternal, prosaic, sober kernel by means of which it partook of absolute form, or the idea. Only in this way, Benjamin wrote in conclusion, could the sober, numinous splendour of the idea, its 'sober light' be revealed. (148)

¹⁹ Winfried Menninghaus, "Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection," in Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin, eds. *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 36.

that is, in an indistinct and equivocal manner. Prose certainly has the meaning of ‘*ungebundene Rede*,’ that is, of a writing style distinguished from poetry by its greater irregularity, variety of rhythm, and its greater proximity to ordinary speech. Benjamin makes it quite clear that ‘prose’ does not mean ‘ornate prose’ . . . For Benjamin, prose is something transparent and colorless [farberloser. . . Ausdruck]. But in addition to its proper meaning, prose has a figural, improper meaning, namely prosaic, plain, ordinary, sober. Furthermore, this improper meaning cannot be distinguished from the proper. But it is this very lack of differentiation . . . that predestines prose to become the comprehensible manifestation of the Absolute.²⁰

For Gasché, this Absolute becomes, in Benjamin’s reading, “de-sacralized, de-divinized by reflection . . . the sober Absolute is an Absolute that has forfeited its transcendence.”²¹ While preserving the Absolute, the sober forfeiture of transcendence results in a critique with no guarantees or certitude. What we are left with, Gasché concludes, is a critique that must be “suspended in relation to an Absolute whose power would finally fulfill its critical intention . . . critique must be critical to the utmost—unrelenting and uncompromisingly negative.”²²

To retrace the steps of this argument: Badiou identified the italicized, narrative passages in “Afternoon of a Faun” as prose. I have asked the question, what then is prose? Badiou cites Lacoue-Labarthe on the becoming-prose of the poem as the

²⁰ Rodolphe Gasché, “The Sober Absolute: On Benjamin and the Early Romantics,” in Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin, eds., *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 65.

²¹ Gasché, “The Sober Absolute,” 65.

²² Gasché, “The Sober Absolute,” 68.

necessary task of contemporary poetry. Lacoue-Labarthe, in turn, cites Benjamin, who cites Kant, the German Romantics, and Hölderlin. Hölderlin, as Beatrice Hanssen notes, will take prosaic sobriety all the way back the Platonic opposition between temperance and mania in the *Phaedrus* dialogue.

On the basis of this critical history, we might offer two hypotheses about “prose.” *Hypothesis 1*: prose is a trope—it is the vehicle into which thinkers place received ideas and connotations about what is “prosaic” and ordinary, and what kind of language or style is adequate to the current situation. The myth here—and “prose” is its name—is that the gods have fled and aren’t returning, so poetry as it once was practiced is no longer adequate. Instead, poetry must restrain itself and become sober and prosaic. This myth is implicit in every non-reflective use of the terms “prose” and the “prosaic”—these usages deserves further scrutiny. Leland Deladurantaye, for example, attempts to negotiate between Agamben’s “idea of prose” and Paul de Man’s “prosaic materiality of the letter”—and both of these in relation to Benjamin’s *reine Sprache*.²³ While his discussion is a careful one, Deladurantaye only glosses the term “materiality,” never pausing to ask how the terms “prose” or “prosaic” modify the concept of materiality in de Man, Agamben, or Benjamin. At least since Jakobson, the “materiality” of language has been associated with *versification*, and the non-semantic linguistic connections highlighted by rhyme or poetic rhythm—those operations that “foreground the signifier.” It is (or should be) quite surprising, then, to encounter the claim that the “materiality of the letter” is somehow essentially “prosaic.” Not only is “prosaic” being used in a non-obvious way in this phrase, it is also very subtly

²³ Leland Deladurantaye, “Agamben’s Potential,” *Diacritics* 30.2 (2000): 3–24.

displacing the prior association of materiality with the effects of versification. These slippages and displacements often occur in the formulation of these thinkers' central critical concepts, and it is precisely these moments that this dissertation has investigated in both philosophical and poetic texts that engage prose as a genre, form, or concept.

Hypothesis 2: Prose is a concept analogous to the qualifier “mere” [bloss] in Rodolph Gasché's analysis of Kant's language in *The Idea of Form*.²⁴ Gasché notes that “mereness” never receives a full elucidation as a concept, either by Kant himself or by his commentators. Nevertheless, the restrictive force of the term “merely” appears, under Gasché's careful reading, to be used in a systematic fashion. He remarks, “it could thus well be that rather than occurring incidentally in Kant's text, *merely* is used for systematic reasons, and that its status is that of a philosophical concept comparable, say, to that of the pure.”²⁵ As opposed to the pure, “mereness” is a strictly negative, delimiting procedure: “What characterizes purity is that even though it stipulates separation and isolation, it is ultimately self-sufficient and consequently is definable from itself. By contrast, what is said to be “merely” something is only negatively delimited; it is what it is only in distinction from, and with respect to, something else.”²⁶

Because of this negativity, mereness has a vagueness or ambiguity to it that has received a bad rap in philosophy: taking a series of examples from Hegel to Husserl,

²⁴ Rodolphe Gasche, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Hereafter Gasché, *Idea of Form*.

²⁵ Gasche, *Idea of Form*, 19.

²⁶ Gasche, *Idea of Form*, 20.

Gasché concludes “‘Mere’ is thus stigmatized as a modality of nondiscursive, nonrigorous, or even sloppy thinking.”²⁷ Prose, likewise, is a sloppy and slippery term—a collection of received wisdom; an impure mixture of negative formal designations (lack of rhyme and regular rhythm, etc.) and content-based connotations (everything associated with “the prosaic”—a set of associations that is also characterized by a series of negations or lacks).

III. Prosaic Nymphs

Given these two hypotheses about “prose,” what, then, should we conclude about Badiou’s reading of Mallarmé’s “Afternoon of a Faun”? It becomes clear under this analysis that Badiou delivers not one but two philosophical readings of the poem. The first reads the encounter with the nymphs as a proper Badiouean event; and his exposition proceeds clearly through the various aspects of that event (Badiou calls the event “Nymphs”), its site, its disappearance from that site, its naming, its undecidability, the Faun’s fidelity or infidelity to it, and so forth. The second—the ‘subterranean’ reading, of which Badiou himself may not be aware—reads the poem in terms of the critical genealogy just proposed for the concept of prose. The poem, in this reading, has a classical, “generic name” in the literary sense: it is a prosimetrum, or a text that alternates between verse and prose. This alternation between verse and prose presents a stylistic conflict, in which the poem (if it is to contain both verse and prose) must decide what is verse and what is prose. This stylistic conflict is analogous to the debate in *Protagoras*, where the styles of Socrates and the sophist go up against

²⁷ Gasché, *Idea of Form*, 20.

one another as much or more than any of the particular positions they take. In Mallarmé, this conflict has a surprising effect on the poem. In Badiou's terms, as we have seen, the prose within the poem is a negative, subtractive operation—"a rather simple narrative" linked to "doubt," but also a kind of admirable restraint on the part of the poet who no longer claims access to transcendent truths.

While there is little change in the versification of the italicized lines, it is true that these lines appear to obey a different syntactic logic. Roseline Crowley notes that, whereas much of the poem is characterized by juxtaposition, with few connectors between sentences, "almost all the main clauses [in the italicized sections, which she terms 'the Fable'] are linked by coordination, and the clauses themselves unfold in a series of dependent clauses, interlocked in rigorous causality."²⁸ The problem is, no matter how simple or sober the prose is, unexpected things happen when these bits of "prose" are introduced into Mallarmé's poem. Even if they are prose, and if they do constitute a rather simple narrative, there is hardly a stable place in the vertiginous temporality of "Afternoon of a Faun" for the story to take place. In the first italicized section, introduced by the poet's apostrophic demand "O Sicilian marsh . . . relate" ["CONTEZ"], we are taken to a prior moment, perhaps the tranquil morning before the afternoon encounter, but this is also (and simultaneously) an account of the Faun selecting and cutting reeds with which to construct his flute: "Ô bords siciliens d'un calme marécage [. . .] CONTEZ / *'Que je coupais ici les creux roseaux domptés / Par le talent'*" [O Sicilian edges of a tranquil marsh (. . .) RELATE / *"How I was cutting*

²⁸ Roseline Crowley, "Toward the Poetics of Juxtaposition: *L'après-Midi d'une Faune*," *Yale French Studies* 54 (1977): 33.

here the hollow reeds / That talent tamed”].²⁹ No fewer than three story-threads are woven intricately throughout the poem, and Mallarmé makes no attempt to settle them into narrative frames or any other hierarchical structure. There is, of course, the dream-narrative of the encounter with the nymphs. A second strain recounts the faun’s puzzlement over the encounter and his uncertainty in separating dream from reality:

Aimai-je un rêve?

Mon doute, amas de nuit ancienne, s’achève
En maint rameau subtil, qui, demeuré les vrais
Bois mêmes, prouve, hélas ! que bien seul je m’offrais
Pour triomphe la faute idéale de roses — (v. 3–7)

[Did I love a dream?

My doubt, hoard of ancient night, ends
In many a subtle branch, which, since the true woods
Themselves remain, proves, alas! that all alone I offered myself
Triumph in the ideal fault of roses —]

Hans-Jost Frey argues against the “traditional reading of this passage [which] sees the proof of the non-existence of the nymphs in the fact that the woods are still there,” instead proposing that the “referential reality [of the woods that remain or of the

²⁹ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies*, Paris: *Livre de Poche*, 1988, p. 51, v. 23–27. For the sake of consistency in referencing Badiou’s reading, I quote (with minor modifications) from the translation provided by Alberto Toscano in the English version of Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 122–41.

nymphs] is not important as such, but only to the extent that it becomes meaningful.”³⁰

That Mallarmé and his Faun place their primary emphasis on the meaningfulness of the “true woods” over and above their referential reality can be easily seen in the third narrative thread of the poem, which traces the development of the Faun’s song. Where the faun, in the above passage, was confident that “the true woods themselves remain,” he will claim just a few lines later, that his natural surroundings were, in fact, entirely an effect of his song:

Que non! par l’immobile et lasse pâmoison
Suffoquant de chaleurs le matin frais s’il lutte,
Ne murmure point d’eau que ne verse ma flûte
Au bosquet arrosé d’accords; et le seul vent
Hors des deux tuyaux prompt à s’exhaler avant
Qu’il disperse le son dans une pluie aride,
C’est, à l’horizon pas remué d’une ride
Le visible et serein souffle artificiel
De l’inspiration, qui regagne le ciel. (v.14–22)

[But no! through the immobile and weary swoon
Stifling the cool morning with heat if it resists,
Murmurs no water that my flute does not pour
On the grove sprinkled with harmonies; and the only wind

³⁰ For Frey’s subtle and rigorous reading of this and other moments of doubt in this poem, see Hans-Jost Frey, “The Tree of Doubt,” *Yale French Studies* 54 (1977): 45–54.

Prompt to exhale from the twin pipes before
It disperses the sound in an arid rain,
Is, on the horizon unstirred by a wrinkle,
The visible and serene artificial breath
Of inspiration, regaining the sky.]

These levels clearly intermix in impossible ways: the same “true woods” that the faun transposes into the musical “grove sprinkled with harmonies” will give way to the marshy landscape from which he cuts the reeds of his pipe in the first place, and this reedy landscape will itself be replaced by the mythological space of the myth of Syrinx (v. 52–56). Frey, commenting on these transitions, concludes that “outside reality is rarified and vanishes in proportion of its becoming meaningful.”³¹ Likewise, the faun’s sexual failure is transposed onto a sterile nature (“Inerte,” or literally “without art”) which only the faun can animate with flowing water and blowing wind through the power of his song.

Crowley writes that this kind of temporal transposition, along with other poetic effects such as puns, enjambment, musical motifs, and deflationary apostrophes, “attack the linearity of the Fable by confusing the order of the narrative.”³² She continues later, “the discourse [of puns, etc.] is systematically juxtaposed to the italicized narrative, and in the long run the project it proposes pushes the interpretation of the poem toward a linguistic solution in which any meaning is caught in the ironic

³¹ Frey, “The Tree of Doubt,” 48.

³² Crowley, “Toward the Poetics of Juxtaposition: *L’après-Midi d’une Faune*,” 36.

confusion of the pun.”³³ This anti-narrative work continues throughout the poem to its conclusion. In one of the most jarring temporal shifts in the poem, the entire temporal logic of “afternoon-ness” is transposed onto a seasonal time so that the poem takes place in “autumn,” the afternoon of the seasons: “À l’heure où ce bois d’or et de cendres se teinte / Une fête s’exalte en la feuillée éteinte” (v. 99–100). Here again, “these woods” [*ce bois*] which have undergone so many changes throughout the poem, herald a new temporal frame—the hour of autumn—with which to explode the stability of the poetic afternoon.³⁴ And of course, the poem ends precisely at twelve noon in a time that is neither “morning” nor “afternoon”—which nevertheless is prior to the supposed “action” (in Badiou’s “rather simple narrative”) of the poem, and before the moment of sleep that would introduce the original doubt (v. 105–7). At this point it should be clear that there is, in fact, nothing that is anywhere near “simple” about temporality, and by extension, narrative in this poem. Even if the italicized sections of the poem are stable within themselves (and they very well may *not* be), there is no place in the rest of the poem for them to land. The shifts, circularities, and abrupt juxtapositions in the surrounding poem ensure that no conclusions can be drawn from the Fable. In Crowley’s words, the poem “must be seen as a rhetorical masquerade, as if Mallarmé were really aiming at undermining the traditional architecture of the Idyll.”³⁵ The poem is *about* this self-undermining, and far from

³³ Crowley, “Toward the Poetics of Juxtaposition: *L’après-Midi d’une Faune*,” 42.

³⁴ Crowley also finds a brief shift to winter earlier in the poem: “Thus in line 62, “souvenirs divers” is a wink toward “souvenirs d’hivers,” the season which Mallarmé associates, in his *Correspondance*, with the sterility he felt while composing the *Hérodiade*, and which he had gladly left for the summer delights of the *Faune*” (39).

³⁵ Crowley, “Toward the Poetics of Juxtaposition: *L’après-Midi d’une Faune*,” 35.

sobering itself in the face of an unknowable event and providing an “austere presentation of doubt” (as Badiou would have it), the poem seems hardly to care what “remains” in the aftermath of its friendly fire. “Prose” in this poem is what is under attack: by the logic of song, by the shifting grounds of figurative landscapes, by puns and other sonic features of Mallarmé’s language, and by the Faun’s own flagging interest in mourning his failed encounter (“Tant pis! vers le bonheur d’autres m’entraîneront,” v. 93). The Nymphs—the aspect of the poem that Badiou chooses as the Name of its Event—are largely beside the point.

What happens when philosophers (especially systematic ones such as Badiou) make mistakes? How does a philosopher’s misreading affect the system? How do we think past a mistake—especially a supposedly “minor” one like an error in literary criticism by a philosopher?³⁶ The stakes, as the preceding discussion has shown, could not be higher for philosophy or poetry: what is the stylistic use of language adequate to the current situation? Is there an isomorphy between world and thought, such that what is “out there” can be comprehended by what we are capable of thinking? The standard claim from Badiou, Benjamin, and others seems to be: only a certain kind (or style) of writing will do for dealing with the world as it is today—post-God, fallen modernity, late capitalism, post-poem—the terms can be debated, but the claim of adequation remains in each instance. To believe that there is some sort of necessary

³⁶ To take a more extreme example, what happens to a philosophical system when it becomes outdated by developments in other fields. Badiou’s theory of the Event is built upon historical developments in, for instance, the field of set theory. Would the event still be thinkable on Badiou’s terms if set theorists somehow resolved one of that field’s longstanding impasses, the Continuum Hypothesis, from which Badiou derives the measureless difference between two infinities, namely Being (in a situation) and the Event? See *Being and Event*, Meditations 26 and 27. I am grateful to a paper by Aaron Hodges for suggesting this hypothetical scenario; any errors in my account of it, of course, are my own.

“match” or isomorphy between style and world entails having a strong interest in getting that match right, and being able to define clearly what concepts like prose, sobriety, and temperance mean. To reject the style-world match (and instead to posit a dissymmetry of world and thought) would require confronting, unpacking, and critiquing that same received wisdom—wrapped up in these same terms (prose, sobriety, etc.). This dissertation has held fast to the second position. The first position—that only a certain style will do for a given situation—is the unexamined assumption behind every debate over the “politics of form,” and the reason why such debates are a dead-end. Is there something inherently liberating in free or open forms, and something irreducibly conservative in fixed or regulated forms? Of course not. To assume so, while at times politically expedient, posits a formal determinism in which an author’s choice of form is no choice at all. Her choice would be either right or wrong. Under a more nuanced view, no style or form provides an exact match with the world it describes; to write in verse is (in Simon Jarvis’s phrase) to “think in verse,” to write in prose is to think in prose, and so on for any given style or genre. There is no writing outside of these formal habits, and no frictionless description of the world as it really is. Whether a given form helps or hinders one’s access to information about the world is up to the judgment of individual writers and their readers. Furthermore, it is precisely this dissymmetry among the various relations of discourses and world that provides the ground for discourse between such disparate styles as verse and prose, poetry and philosophy. That neither discourse has a formal monopoly on adequate description is, I think, a pre-requisite for any discussion in which poetry and philosophy are at play on an even field.

Ultimately, if we want to address this question of style and world, we must keep equally in view the philosophical texts and the literary texts that put the concept of “prose” into play. For philosophy, this would include any text that presents, however clumsily, a notion of a “prosaic” modernity, prosaic materiality, or an overdetermined concept of the plain or the ordinary. Poets in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries have, among all of their other concerns, taken on the challenge of exploring these notions from within—in texts that work to mix, blur, erase and explode various notions of what is verse and what is prose.

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